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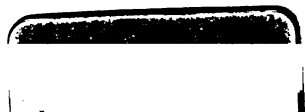
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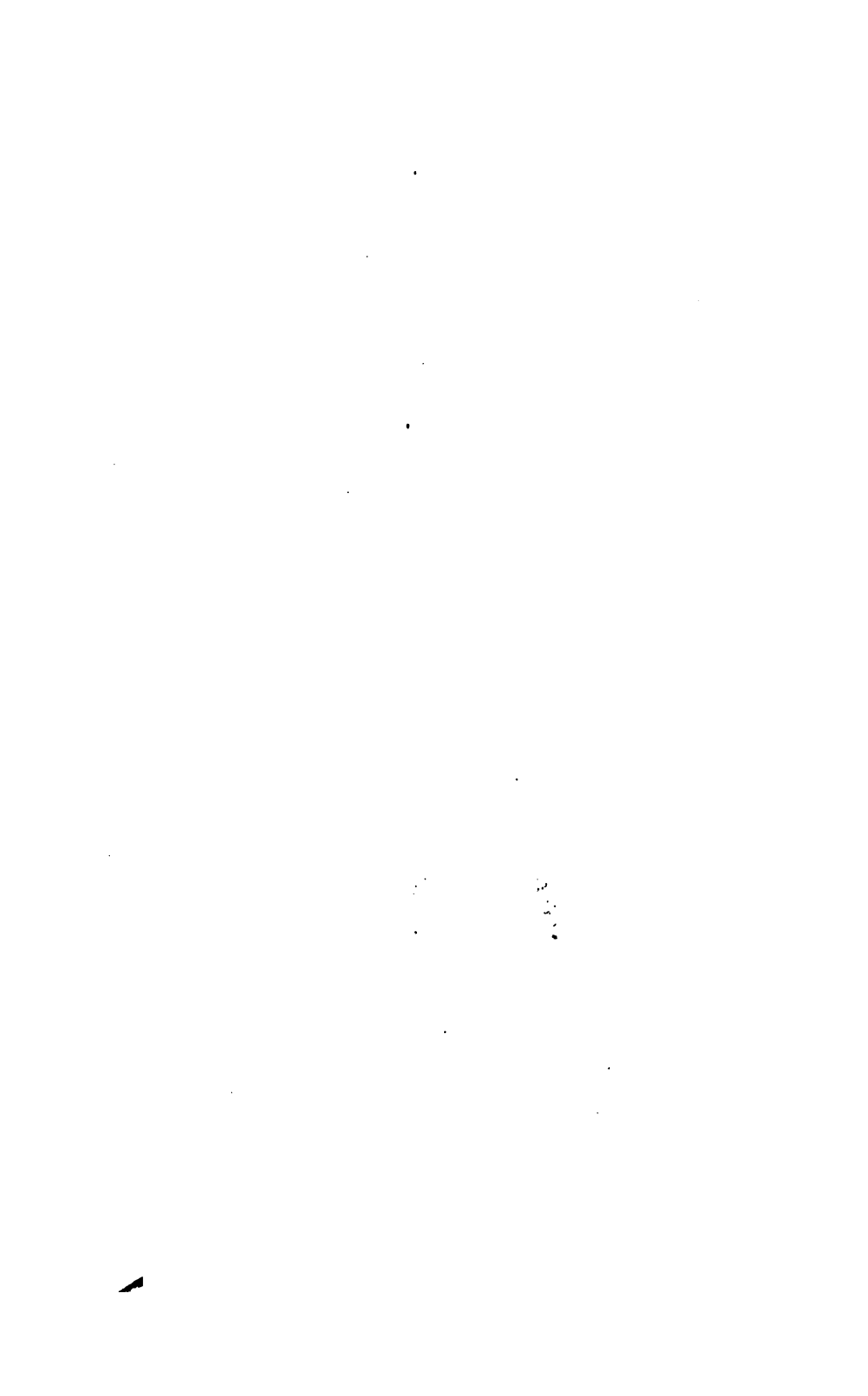






ROPES OF SAND,

VOL. III.



# ROPES OF SAND.

J. Nobel.

BY

W. P. LANCASTER,

AUTHOR OF 'A SCREW LOOSE.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. III.



LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY,

PUBLISHER IN ORDINARY TO HER MAJESTY.

1869.

250. W. 220.



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JOHN CHILDS AND SON, PRINTERS.

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# ROPES OF SAND.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE KING-STREET IAGO.

**M**R DOVEY SNEWING is comfortably reading his morning paper in his luxurious chambers in King Street. To him repairs Stephen Gow, on his way to the city.

‘Glad to see you, Gow,’ cries Snewing, rising. ‘I meant to have looked you up myself before this.’

‘Any news of Fearon lately?’ inquired Gow, drawing his gloves off.

‘Not actually married, I believe, to his fair one,’ drawled Snewing, ‘but is to be every week. Is kept well up to the

mark, I fancy. A really clever girl. Worboys will tell you more than I can. Perhaps he will look in presently.'

'Low matches are in vogue just now,' proceeded Gow, polishing his hat. 'I come straight from Miles Sudgrove's; there has been a tremendous scandal there.'

'Nothing connected with Mrs Pipechick, eh?' asked Snewing, uneasily.

'O dear, no; what put that into your head?' resumed Gow. 'Master Brian has taken a leaf from Fearon's book. Now, candidly, what do you think of Brian Sudgrove?'

'Oho,' thought Snewing, 'so you're jealous at last, my ancient friend, and you'll be none the less so for being so mole-eyed at first. I thought our fair Clara would try you a little too much at last.'

'You don't answer me,' repeated Gow, as the other seemed plunged in reflection.

'Candidly, my dear Gow,' hesitated Snewing, 'I would rather give no opinion in this case. One is so often wrong. I so

shrink from saying a bad word against any one.'

'Come, Snewing, as one friend to another,' persuaded Gow, 'is Brian Sudgrove trustworthy?'

'As frankly, he is not,' replied Snewing, with a seeming effort.

'Would he be a good friend, now, for any young married woman of our acquaintance—say, for instance, Mrs Brown Howard or Mrs Sydney Gosh?' Gow questioned, with a nervous kind of carelessness.

'All I say will, I presume, be held sacred?' proceeded Snewing, brimming with candour.

'I assure you, I ask for no idle reason, and your confidence will be most strictly respected,' added Gow.

'Well, then,' pursued Snewing, with the utmost deliberation, 'our mutual friend, Mr Brian, has, doubtless, many good qualities, but I should be very sorry to see him on intimate terms in any household in which I felt an interest.'

‘Precisely so. You only confirm my previous impressions,’ acquiesced Gow, looking extremely uncomfortable. ‘I am really extremely obliged to you. I will now tell you a secret in return. I’m put down as Miles Sudgrove’s executor.’

‘An important trust,’ agreed Snewing; ‘but no fitter person, I am sure, could be selected.’

‘You’re very kind to say so,’ went on Gow. ‘At least, Noyes is my co-executor; I don’t stand quite alone.’

‘Noyes is no favourite of mine,’ said Snewing.

‘He seems a little too clever, it’s true—I really ought not to tell you,’ hesitated Gow, ‘but it will be guessed at pretty soon. Only think, Brian has been cut off with a shilling by his father. Georgina gets Orpwood, the new property, and all the rest, for her life,—remainder to her child in tail. Brian is bent on marrying some low girl, so his father very properly has left him out.’

‘Indeed you surprise me,’ rejoined Snewing; ‘I did not think our friend Brian a marrying man.’

‘Taking all this into consideration,’ pursued Gow, glancing at Snewing as he spoke, ‘and, at his father’s written desire, I have forbidden Brian Sudgrove my house.’

‘Used he to be much there?’ asked Snewing, with an assumption of the most sublime innocence.

‘Oh dear, no,’ rejoined Gow hastily; ‘only now and then, from my knowing his father so well.’

‘Exactly. That would naturally bring him,’ mused Snewing. ‘You’ll stay till Worboys comes,’ he added, seeing Stephen was preparing to rise.

‘Indeed, I am far behind time already. But I’m glad to have found you in. You have confirmed me on several important points. It does one so much good confiding to a real friend,’ said Gow, pressing Snewing’s hand.



‘Mind, I’ve only spoken my impressions. Don’t quote me, there’s a good fellow,’ he called after Gow in a hearty voice.

So Gow went his way in no very comfortable frame of mind ; and, in due time, his place was filled by Captain Worboys in Dovey Snewing’s audience chamber.

‘We’ve work before us, Captain,’ spake Snewing cheerily.

‘Can’t find me too much, old boy,’ echoed that excellent and gallant officer ; ‘while I’ve a leg to stand upon, or a shilling to spend, Ned Worboys will work himself to the bone for his pals.’

‘Your sentiment does you credit,’ commended Snewing ; ‘this will be a job after your own heart, Ned.’

‘Proceed ; the old war-horse is pricking up his ears,’ exclaimed Worboys in appropriate metaphor.

‘That old driveller Gow is jealous at last,’ propounded Snewing with a mock-serious face. ‘Came with a supposed case

for my advice, the ostrich. "If Brian Sudgrove called on so and so, what should I say." "Bad," said I, "very bad." So off he stalks now, a perfect Othello. The whole thing is a joke to roar over for hours. Only I've no time for roaring. Imagine now what the old fool has done,—forbidden Brian Sudgrove his house! The very thing to make his wife care for Brian, even if she had hated him before, old idiot! The best course he could have possibly taken, to enhance all a lover's perfections in the eyes of a giddy young woman; the perfect dotard!'

'Damme, Snewing,' ejaculated Worboys, 'I wish we were retained on Mrs Gow's side of the question. She serves the old boy out perfectly right, and I respect her for it. Who wouldn't play the very devil with such a snivelling, shivering infirmity? Gad, I don't half relish working to give him any handle against her. Jove, I've half a mind to try and cut out young Sudgrove with her.'

‘So you shall in a month’s time, when my purpose is gained,’ said Snewing, condescending, which he did not often do, to smooth down his satellite. ‘Meantime, let this console you. We don’t work for Gow the imbecile, but for our precious selves. Our interests and his happen just for half a mile or so to run abreast on the same pathway. That’s mere chance. I won’t alter my course for that. I don’t set you this job for love of Gow, my boy.’

‘All right, old Snew, command your most obedient. I am ready spurred and booted at all hours at your summons,’ rejoined the Captain; but he used allegory, being literally in a pair of light cheque trousers and polished highlows; and some folks had actually been wicked enough to question, whether that martial personage had ever felt a horse under him.

‘Now this is how I reason, Worboys,’ propounded Snewing. ‘Fidgetty old Gow having, according to his own mouth, suddenly interrupted communications between

his fair spouse and her young admirer, who previously ran tame about the house all day—as Aurelia Van takes deuced good care we all should be duly informed—I argue, old boy, that it isn't in human nature that they shouldn't try to correspond with each other. That great national institution the Post-office will be the recipient and purveyor of their confidences. Now if she writes notes to him, she dare let no servant see them in a house to which his access is forbidden. Consequently, she must post them herself. We must have her narrowly watched for the next few days. Who's to do it? One who will revel in the task, Aurelia Van, most wiry of spinsters.'

'What a 'cute chap it is, what a regular Solon at argument,' murmured Worboys, gazing ecstatically at his chief, 'and I suppose I'd better step up to Tavistock Street, and hint to the sprightly Aurelia what she's to do. Am I to promise her anything?'

‘That’s at your discretion,’ assented Snewing. ‘The old jade loves her trade of picking holes in her neighbours so well, that, if you merely hint that Gow has forbidden young Sudgrove his house, and that you have reason to suspect pretty Clara means to communicate with the extruded one, trust Aurelia for keeping her eyes open in that direction.’

‘Won’t Gow tear his locks in senile frenzy just,’ laughed Worboys, ‘if Van is worth her salt at this pinch?’

‘Imagine!’ simpered Snewing, knocking the ash off his cigar, ‘Gow tried to make me believe, that he had closed his doors on Brian out of respect to Sudgrove Senior’s anger and denunciation. True, this gave him a handle, but he has hated the sight of the youngster for months.’

‘So much for that,’ concluded Worboys. ‘Now about the Spanish Castle Company. You want, Snewing, for me to be the nominal holder of 200 of the shares,

which you got for sketching out the scheme. All right, old fellow. Why shouldn't you put me on the board, eh ?'

'Our relations in business are a turn too well known,' hesitated Snewing. 'Since you agree, I suppose, I needn't recapitulate the details of the undertaking again.'

'Damme, no,' exclaimed Worboys; 'what amount of shares are bonâ fide subscribed for ?'

'We've got about fifteen hundred pounds actually paid by the outsider shareholders,' was the reply.

'You'll vote that for preliminary expenses, eh ?'

'Probably,' allowed Snewing, with a furtive glance at the Captain.

'One thing more,' pursued Worboys, 'Violet Wicker has struck for more supplies. Fearon barely keeps himself in cigars. This marriage mustn't slip through.'

'I'll give you a cheque for twenty

pounds at once,' said Snewing, opening a drawer. 'Hurry the wedding on to the utmost.'

'Gad, she's almost too good for that fellah!' mused Worboys, twisting his moustache. 'She's turned out so doocid neat and interesting on the trifle we supplied. Damme, sir, that girl's a genius; she carries it off like a duchess. There's something so elegant and refined about her; which, considering all I know about the way she has knocked about, really does her the greatest credit.'

'How enthusiastic we are,' sneered Snewing; 'you're a boy yet, Captain, in experience. Why, you have dressed up this puppet yourself, and then you are bewitched by the works of your own hands; well, it's nothing to me: let her marry Comper first, and run away with her yourself afterwards, if you have either the whim or the inclination to do so.'

'Jove, Snewing,' rejoined the Captain, a shade ruffled, 'you ain't susceptible, at

any rate. Interest is the only girl for you, my boy.'

'And yet, I believe I may announce to you,' added Snewing, rubbing his hands together, 'that I shall enter into a matrimonial engagement before I am many hours older.'

'Meaning the Pipechick,' surmised the Captain. 'There's not much doubt she will say yes. This quarrel between the Sudgroves improves her prospects, eh?'

'Improves her prospects,' echoed Snewing drily. 'Be my best man, Captain?'

'Delighted,' acquiesced Worboys, 'on one condition, Van is not to be bridesmaid.'

'I won't put your friendship to such a fearful test,' smiled Snewing.

'I say, old boy, how well we do pull together,' observed Worboys, with his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'We tell each other all our little games; no reserves, no half confidences. Damme, it's touching, it's quite pastoral.'



‘I suspect we are both,’ continued Snewing, ‘two devilish well-conditioned fellows.’

‘Beyond all doubt,’ insinuated Worboys, ‘and then, dear boy, we have the strongest interest to keep friends. For instance, I know so many touching little dodges and incidents about you.’

‘And I,’ assented Snewing, looking steadily at his friend, ‘know so well the last gallant exploit of your military life—’

‘Damn it, Snewing, hold your tongue,’ cried Worboys.

‘I mean to. Then I’m off to pay my respects to Georgina. I don’t want a third party this time, eh, Captain, like a previous visit,’ said Snewing slyly.

‘And I’m bound to sweet Aurelia’s,’ spake Worboys.



## CHAPTER II.

### MRS RAINBIRD EXPOSTULATES.

‘**A**RE you attending, Samson?’ cried Mrs Rainbird, fiercely; ‘if you’re the monument, say so, and I won’t wear my lungs out any more. If you don’t care what becomes of Helen, say it out. It will be pleasanter to all parties in the long run. If you think, that those who came as fortunes and end as beggaries, are to be shook as violently by the hand as ever; and all the fuss continued which you, in spite of all my tears, would ever lavish upon that plain young man; then be a man for once, and contradict me out, if you please. It may prostrate me

for the present, but it will be kindness in the end, to this your wormy state of subterfuge.'

'I'm sure it's more than natural, my dear,' hesitated Samson Rainbird, 'that this fall in young Sudgrove's prospects, added to being at all times in a precarious state, and now and then a little off your appetite; should have, I may say, worked you up a little. But you'll soothe down, my dear—you'll smooth it off—with patience.'

'Who talks of smoothness to a suffering martyr like me?' protested Mrs Rainbird, with a voice of gloom. 'Since this was brought to his relatives' ears, I have been a nerve, a fibre, a kind of human electric-machine for receiving shocks in all directions. I am shook at the dropping of a spoon; I am convulsed at the pulling of a bell. Some, as ought to be a comfort, is as deaf as their own monuments. I name 14  
no names, and give no further particulars.'

'What is done can't be mended,' con-

soled Samson; 'it was certainly unfortunate that you should happen to talk over our family affairs with a perfect stranger, who shammed fainting. Not that I blame you, my dear,' he added, hastily.

'O Samson, Samson!' exclaimed Mrs Rainbird, 'how can you try and turn it on to me? and who so ready to show that viper in as you? With your bowing and scraping, and "Make yourself at home, mem," and that dear, injured child couldn't bring the glass of water soon enough for your tempers.'

'You spoke highly in her favour, though, just after she was gone,' expostulated Samson, meekly.

'I did so purposely, not to alarm you; I had my apprehensions. What did I say to Kedge?—as any jury, grand or petty, in this country, will bear me out—"Kedge," said I, "as long as your master will fetch in them from the highways and hedges, how can you expect anything to remain undivulged?"'

‘I know you spoke to that effect, my dear,’ returned Samson; ‘but that was after Brian had told us this Miss Van’s object in forcing her way in.’

‘I am glad you don’t deny I said it,’ persisted Mrs Rainbird with calm superiority; ‘I was prepared even for that denial. This has been spared me. Let us be thankful for small mercies.’

‘But that’s not the point,’ he suggested, in some alarm.

‘O Rainbird!’ whined his wife, ‘is this a time for you to mind about your points, like a careless punster? Can a father think about such trifles, with his sweet girl likely enough to be deserted?’

‘Come, come, my love,’ interrupted Samson, ‘you really put things a little wrongly at times—quite, of course, inadvertently. Nothing, I must say, sounds less like any wish to desert Helen than Sudgrove’s behaviour. I really cannot have the poor boy misstated.’

Mrs Rainbird shook her head with deep and desponding import.

‘Teal deserted his second wife,’ she observed, with much feeling, ‘left her after six months, with a wash-hand stand and a pair of duplicates. He had, perhaps, the finest head of hair I ever witnessed. They had never got on well together. She had brought him a little money.’

‘Why should Brian desert Helen for that?’ asked Rainbird. ‘Besides, he hasn’t a fine head of hair at all. I must say, my dear, that this anecdote of your friend Mr Teal does not present him in a favourable light.’

‘Teal was a remarkable man,’ pursued Mrs Rainbird, ‘my father thought this restlessness of Teal’s latter years might be laid, in some respect, to a disappointment he had had in earlier life. Who was the object of that disappointment, I should be betraying sacred confidence to suggest. The curious similarity of the cases lies in

this. Teal left a note upon the wash-hand stand, saying, that he judged it better, being in want of means, to remove to a distance. What says this young Sudgrove's letter, whom you are always so mightily sure of? "In my present want of means," Teal's very words, "any employment, near or far, it would be, just now, my duty to accept." And if he does desert her,' concluded Mrs Rainbird, with the air of having stated a proposition of Euclid, 'it may fret her a bit at first, but it will be to me a good and precious riddance.'

'She will not take it as lightly as you think,' said Rainbird. 'After all, Brian without prospects is good enough for Helen without prospects also, if she likes him, which she does.'

'Likes him, indeed!' declaimed Mrs Samson with contempt, 'and much a girl of her age ought to be consulted as to likes and dislikings. Why, they're weather-cocks, is girls. And, as to prospects, she has looks, and they are prospects if pro-

perly managed. Now, she's just the kind of girl to attract some one much older than herself with a comfortable fortune. I wish I could think such good in store for her. But, if we allow this young Sudgrove to go hanging on, he'll be no credit to the place, and will keep others off.'

'Helen shall do just as she pleases,' said Samson, unusually firm for him.

'I see no use in a girl having a father,' remarked Mrs Rainbird, 'if he isn't there to curb her, when she flies in the face of her own interest.'

'At least, I will speak to Helen after he has been,' conceded Samson. 'He comes to-day, doesn't he?'

'Then don't blame me, but only yourself, Mr Rainbird, whatever happens,' concluded Mrs Rainbird, with a lofty resignation and prepared for the worst contingencies. And Samson thought to himself, as he stumbled out to his work-shop, that it would be equally ticklish to blame his spouse, if Brian deserted Helen, as it would have



been to deny her the full credit of his courtship, had Brian turned out a young duke.

In about an hour's time Brian reported himself at Memoria Lodge, and on his arrival Mrs Rainbird retired up-stairs to her room in high dudgeon; because of his looks and manner not expressing greater contrition and remorse for his newly-incurred mendicity. However, Helen was all he wanted, and Helen was unchanged; and, if changed at all, only more affectionate since his reverses.

‘Better news, dearest,’ he began, ‘than I’ve been able to bring since my domestic earthquake. A chance of permanent employment on a third-rate penny paper.’

‘My good old boy,’ said Helen, ‘look what I am bringing you down to.’

‘I shall thank you for all this in a few years, Helen,’ he continued; ‘nothing my character required so much as to be obliged to learn self-reliance. The first few months may be a little up-hill; but while you cheer me on, and I know that you will marry me

the first moment I have a chance of permanently supporting two, why, I have nothing to complain of.'

'Remember, Brian, I can earn a little by sewing, and perhaps get a few pupils in music among beginners,' encouraged Helen.

'You industrious little woman,' said Brian, taking both her hands. 'By the way, how fearfully gloomy Mrs Rainbird looks; she greeted me as if I were a murderer.'

'Oh yes,' smiled Helen, 'she takes it quite as an insult to herself you're turning out so poor. She's so disappointed, and quite mopes over it. Papa treats it as a matter of course, and makes her quite angry, by saying he felt certain you must turn out poor, as he never felt at his ease with a rich man yet.'

'She thinks, then, I came here under false pretences,' suggested Brian; 'and, perhaps, when I think of it, I did. The real fact being, that I came simply because you

were here, and with no other reflection whatever.'

'Poor old boy,' whispered Helen, leaning towards him, 'it was to have been a great squire, and married to a very fine lady, and now it's a newspaper hack with a poor little beginner's music mistress.'

'I can't afford to change you, sweet, for all that,' he murmured, smoothing the ripples out of her hair.

'Now let me picture,' she went on, 'what this wife of yours would have been like. Very stately and cold, of course, with a velvet gown and a diamond tiara when you asked the neighbours. Why, I've one old black silk gown and a jet necklace.'

'I am glad, dear, I never gave you any jewellery in the days of my prosperity. It would only have vulgarized you,' looking into her eyes as he said it.

'I should be frightened to wear such things,' she laughed, 'I should feel as if

the jewels themselves knew I had no right to put them on.'

'Well, darling, we shall be happy enough without them, I foresee,' answered Brian.

'Yet to think of how much you have given up for me saddens, oh, so saddens me,' she sighed.

'You silly little bewitching thing,' broke in Brian, 'I must set you right in this nonsense by a very conceited remark—'

'But you did sacrifice all,' she persisted with pretty seriousness.

'Suppose a very rich old man came to marry you,' hazarded Brian with mock solemnity. 'I fancy you would say, you liked somebody better than the enormously wealthy veteran. It's conceited in me to assume this preference, but you brought this on yourself, Miss Helen.'

'Oh, I do so hope the old creature will not call,' cried Helen laughing, with a little

spice of earnestness in the laugh, 'for I know my step-mother for one would find him dreadfully charming.'

'But you haven't answered me as to your view of the case,' urged Brian.

'You shan't have any answer on this point,' pouted she in feigned displeasure.

'I only wished to show, love,' he continued, 'out of your own fresh lips, that I have only done for you, what I know you would do for me. And, that, without you, if I were the richest man in England, I should be the most miserable wretch in her Majesty's dominions.'

'Look through the window, Brian,' she exclaimed, 'my father has found another customer for a tombstone.'

'May he bring us better luck than the last one,' said Brian, touching her forehead with his lips as he leant over her to look.

'I did not tell you to look out, sir,' she cried, 'expecting you to make such a public exhibition of yourself. Sit down again this instant. You shall be scolded

presently. I'll punish you by not letting you see this very funny old man, who hobbles about, with knobby kind of places all over his face. See, you catch them now as he leans. Oh, I forgot, you were not to see him. But I can punish you easily in some other way.'

Enter Kedge in violent excitement.

'Wherever has your dear papa laid hands on that there gouty customer?' Then seeing Brian, she added, 'Beg pardon, Miss, I didn't know your young man was on the premises,—least of all, that you was a-keeping company in here.'

'Never mind me, Mrs Kedge,' laughed Brian, 'you seem excited; do you know this old fellow all over knots?'

'I should ha' known him,' ejaculated Kedge, wiping her face with her apron, 'among a million.'

'He's not a spy, like the little old lady, eh Kedge?' asked Helen, anxiously.

'Which, please the Lord, I may get her vixen head against a pump, before I'm

done with her; and I would ha' done that day but she got round Missis with her lies and treacle ways—no, yonder ain't no spy as I knows on,' Kedge continued, 'I'd ha' known him among a dozen.'

'A million you said before, Kedge,' suggested Helen with gentle mischief, correcting her.

'Ay, a dozen million,' cried Kedge, driven to a wilder estimate; 'I do believe I should have known him, even without his knobs; and it stands to reason with, as not one is knobbed in sixty.'

'You'd better go out and speak to him, Kedge,' suggested Brian. 'Be quick, see, he's just going.'

'Get along with you, Mr Brian,' retorted Kedge. 'You are always gaming of me.'

'Why, Mrs Kedge,' exclaimed Brian at a venture, 'from your shyness one might suppose, this was an old suitor of your own.'

'Lord bless you,' cried Kedge. 'What

put that into your head, Mr Brian ?' but she looked a little conscious all the same.

Re-enter Samson to tea, having got rid of his visitor.

'Papa,' began Helen, 'we are all on tiptoe of expectation, to learn the name of that strange-looking old gentleman. One of us has recognized a friend.'

'A name, my love,' answered Rainbird, calmly, 'as curious as his exterior. Let me see—Brimeswiggles.'

'That's a wicked falsehood,' said Kedge, with emphasis.

'Dear me. Is that you, Kedge?' asked Rainbird with a start. 'What a sudden way you have, Kedge. Now it seems to me, that nobody, who does call here, ever does leave their right names. Perhaps it has grown customary of late, dear, among the aristocracy. The aristocracy do, I'm told, adopt odd habits on a sudden.'

'Where did you know him, Kedge?' questioned Helen.



‘That, Miss, to you I will never divulge,’ replied Kedge, and retired.

Brian began to laugh, and Helen and Samson soon joined him, and they became very merry on the subject of Kedge’s supposed early admirer.

Loo Rainbird’s head here appeared at the parlour door.

‘Ma’s compliments, if it could be convenient to Mr Sudgrove, not to shake the house quite so much with shouting, it will be safer for her precarious state above-stairs; as well as less calculated to alarm the neighbours or have in the police.’

‘I thought, my dears,’ said Samson, simply, ‘that we were enjoying ourselves just a turn too much. My love to your mother, and we’ll be sure not to laugh again.’

‘Now, Helen, child,’ he continued, ‘I want one word with Sudgrove before he goes.’

Helen kissed her father, and left them.

‘My dear boy,’ began Samson, cheerily,

‘I’m sure I wish you two were comfortably married, at once, with all my heart; for I really believe our girl won’t get any one to suit her half so well; but you see, my wife, Brian——’

Here the parlour door slowly opened, and Mrs Rainbird appeared in person, with no very propitiative expression on her countenance. Brian looked annoyed, and Samson began fidgeting uneasily.

‘I have deemed it wise,’ began that exemplary woman, while Samson quailed beneath the sternness of her glance, ‘to rise from my racking couch, whither sounds, which reminded me strongly of tavern merriment, have lately been wafted; —to arise, I say, by a superhuman effort of the will, and speak in person, what I feared the vacillation’—here she fixed Rainbird again, who murmured ‘certainly, my dear’—‘I say, the vacillation of those, who should uphold me, might soften in the delivery.’

‘You need not fear speaking your

mind openly before me, Mrs Rainbird,' assured Brian.

'My dear,' stammered Samson, 'had we not better call Helen back?' sorely afraid he spoke, of being swept away by the eloquential torrents of the daughter of the Pillocalf; and requiring much his daughter's aid, to stem the tide of opposition from that fragile exotic, his spouse.

'Mr Sudgrove,' said Mrs Rainbird, clearing her throat, 'reduced as I am to a cipher in my own family, and compelled, from being in a condition in which any contradiction might prove fatal, to abdicate much of my household control; I do not wish quite to be pushed aside into a corner, in the discussion of Helen's future relations with any young man. I am not quite lumber yet, and will not be treated accordingly.'

'We had no wish to exclude you from our chat in any way,' apologized Samson. 'Had we, Sudgrove? now I appeal to you.'

‘The Rainbird disposition,’ continued she, with the air of stating an ascertained scientific fact, ‘is, to quote the words of my late respected father, a mixture of inherent obstinacy, blended, I fear, with much sullenness of temperament. This, exemplified in all its aspects in Mr Rainbird, is developed also, though in a less degree, in my eldest daughter. So far, I may venture to say, you go with me, Mr Sudgrove,’ and she turned to him in a matter-of-fact routine way.

‘I regret to say, my dear madam,’ spoke Sudgrove, ‘that I must venture on the contrary, most respectfully, to dissent from every syllable you have as yet uttered.’

‘Ah!’ replied she in a tone of patronizing pity. ‘You hear this, Rainbird. I shudder for your daughter’s future; but have your own way! I shall now proceed, heeded or unheeded, nevertheless, to give you my views. To commence, this young man of very small means, and uncertain

prospects—pray correct me, sir, if I am wrong, I am used to very scanty ceremony—’

‘Your statement is fairly true, though somewhat harshly put,’ allowed Brian.

‘I say, my dear, you know,’ stammered Samson, ‘we might just as well talk it over pleasantly, as in this gloom and earthquake style of yours. After all, Sudgrove hasn’t murdered any one in wanting to marry our girl, or forged either.’

‘Samson, I shall do my duty,’ answered that sociable martyr, his wife. ‘Pleasant I am when pleasant I feel, and not a moment sooner. I am not one of your softening ones; and when a girl’s happiness is to be wrecked and trifled away, I’m not going to chuckle and joke about it, whatever you may do.’

‘Without going to the extent of a chuckle, my love,’ hazarded Samson, ‘a little forbearance, you know.’

‘By all means continue, Mrs Rainbird,’

interposed Brian, 'I can stand fire pretty well in Helen's cause.'

'A young man leads us to suppose,' said Mrs Rainbird, as if she were reading a newspaper extract, 'that, as the only son of a wealthy father, his expectations are considerable. If I am a liar,' said Mrs Rainbird, pausing, with extreme urbanity, 'I shall be extremely obliged to be told so. I pause for a reply.'

'True, agreed Brian, quietly; 'with this addition, that Helen knew, my father had no legal necessity imposed on him to leave me one penny.'

'On the faith of such expectations, my daughter Helen consents to engage herself to this young man,' she pursued, like an act of parliament.

'That I deny,' cried Brian. 'I trust there was a little personal preference besides.'

'If my husband,' proceeded Mrs Rainbird, with chilling irony, 'is content to

stand there and hear me interrupted, why, interrupted I must be. My late father, and, indeed, another gentleman, who had at one time almost a husband's right to have interfered, would not have allowed it. I remember my father remarking on one occasion, "I'd twizzle the man's nose off, who would venture to contradict that melting snow-drop." My father was an athletic man. Ah, well, I must take the consequences of my own rash choice !'

'My dear,' spoke Samson, with a pained face, 'you are going it rather this evening, to an extent remarkable even in you, my love; than whom no woman in England has a better idea how to, let us say—go it.'

'This being the case—I have just done, Samson,' she went on, eyeing him contemptuously—'it alone remains for me to suggest in conclusion, that, having gained access to this domestic circle on representations which, it is sufficient to say, can never be verified; would it not be more

graceful in Mr Sudgrove—I put it in a general way—to retire?’

‘Retire is rather vague,’ rejoined Brian; ‘pray, explain yourself further.’

‘I mean,’ pursued Mrs Rainbird, with a wind-mill kind of motion of the arm, intended to be of an explanatory nature, ‘that Mr Sudgrove should withdraw, remove, cease, allow himself to drop and be dropped, discontinue communication. I trust, I have now made my meaning clear to the most feeble intellects.’

‘I repudiate entirely,’ said Brian, with decision, ‘so mean, so ambiguous, a future course of action. Mr Rainbird, to you I appeal. Your wife is hopelessly prejudiced against me. When I can earn, say, a hundred a-year, permanently, I intend to claim Helen. That will be no great fall from what she is used to at present. Meantime, I cannot relinquish her, ambiguously or unambiguously, till she tells me herself to do so. I confide in you, Mr Rainbird,



to allow no domestic restraint to be put upon her.'

'Yes, Brian Sudgrove, yes,' said Samson, rubbing his tremulous palms together, 'I will do my endeavour in that direction ; trust me I will.'

'There's a pretty fellow,' sneered Mrs Rainbird, raising her voice, which, considering her fragile state, was remarkably strong when she chose—'there's a precious help for any weak woman to lean on ; so ready as he is to side with them as speaks up to his wife, as if they was heirs and funded properties. Either I am mistress here or I am not. I've asked you to retire ; and if my husband doesn't choose to enforce it, I sha'n't be the only woman who was hastened into her grave by unkindness, nor yet the last. I've done, Samson. It will be palpitations for me for the next twelve hours. Send a boy for Gloizer at once, if you don't wish for a coroner's verdict in the house.'

And Mrs Rainbird staggered dramatically, and, after a good deal of stage effect, succeeded in leaving the room. Helen soon replaced her, summoned by her father, which both Samson and Brian felt to be an improvement.

‘Helen, my child,’ said Samson, ‘your mother-in-law has been, I may say—being in want of an expression—going it.’

‘Did she abuse poor Brian very much?’ asked Helen, prettily teasing about her lover’s hair.

‘Well, I can’t deny, she went off a little at times, on what might be considered verging on it,’ admitted Samson.

‘My dearest girl,’ urged Brian, ‘it is plain my coming here irritates Mrs Rainbird greatly. What can we do, Mr Rainbird?’

‘Perhaps,’ suggested Samson, hopefully, ‘she may in a few days be less inclined to—go it.’

‘Meanwhile you must not come again,

my old boy, till I write. Eh, papa ?'

'Well, possibly, it would be best, till we smooth things a little.'

'Good-bye, both of you,' cried Brian, 'I'm so sorry to have caused you all this household bother.'





### CHAPTER III.

#### AURELIA AS REGENERATOR OF SOCIETY.

‘**D**EAR CLARA,

‘ I am full of troubles just now, and miss your sympathy and advice greatly. I do not complain of your husband not admitting me in the least. My father would certainly fix a quarrel on him, if he did. What I would consult you on is this. Helen’s step-mother is a worldly, selfish woman. Since my fall in position she has worked against me day and night. Helen is staunch as ever, but the poor child leads a wretched life of it, as my delinquencies are daily visited

upon her innocent head. I have had to discontinue seeing her there at present. The father is a good little man, who wishes me well, but unstable as water, and in most wholesome terror of his wife. Could you go and see the poor child for me, or what? If we could but talk over, to what extent of concealment I should be justified in persuading Helen, to get a glimpse of her now and then. I wonder if you could be at the Museum to-morrow about 11 A.M. It is a public day. If you did consent to go and see Helen for me, I could come a little of the way with you. Don't do either unless you *quite* like.

‘Yours very truly,  
‘BRIAN SUDGROVE.’

We give this letter to explain why Clara Gow is leaving her door in Russell Square, on foot, one morning about twenty minutes after her husband has left for the city in his brougham. Clara Gow had been very unhappy, and not a little rebel-

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lious, an unusual feeling with her, since her husband had refused to receive Brian. Like all over-sensitive women, she could bear almost anything more easily than the sense of any imagined injustice. Conscious, moreover, of an entire change in Stephen Gow's manner to her of late; in her present frame of mind, she felt too hurt to seek any explanation of him; and old Stephen did not improve matters by detailing, in her presence, Dovey Snewing's opinion of Brian; not actually naming his informant, but incautiously letting out that he had seen Snewing, a few sentences afterwards. Vexed beyond expression at the cruel injustice of Dovey's scandal, and angry that her husband should be infatuated enough to consult such a man as Dovey on his future attitude in the Sudgrove quarrel; she had hastily penned that night a few words of sympathy to Brian, and posted them herself next morning in the square stump. She was a little annoyed at nearly knocking down Miss Van, as she

turned hurriedly to retrace her steps. It was the first time she had seen that indefatigable little lady since that bright achievement of Brian's detection ; so when Miss Van held out her hand in sweet sincerity, Clara bowed slightly without taking it and passed on, to mark her full appreciation of Miss Van's late services to society. This cut direct from one of the best houses in Russell Square—for the fair Aurelia classed her acquaintance according to the calibre of their town residences—was a severe blow to this wiry little wader among the quicksands of fashionable life. Hating Clara before sufficiently, her bile was stirred more than ever now to revenge ; and fresh impulse being added, or a hint given on a visit from Captain Worboys, the result was, that Aurelia Van watched the pavement of Russell Square before Gow's mansion, during city hours, with a wakeful and untiring malignity. Either Brian will come to Clara, she argued, or Clara might go to Brian, or she

might intercept a messenger from either ; all or each was fish to Aurelia's net of mischief. Consequently, when Clara sallied forth, rather incautiously, we must confess, considering how she was situated, to meet Brian at the British Museum ; if we had chanced to glance along the line of square houses, to the corner street which terminated one of the square's sides, we might have seen a veiled and bonneted head protruding, belonging to a skimpily draped body, concealed round the corner afore-said ; the lean neck thrust forward, like that of a battered and veteran vulture, who had possibly seen better raptorial days. By degrees, as Clara walked farther, the rest of the figure above mentioned came in view, and disclosed the somewhat weazel-like outline of our old favourite—Aurelia Van.

‘She is off to meet him somewhere,’ ran the current of Aurelia's thoughts, as she alternately tripped and slunk after the retreating Clara. ‘Poor Mr Gow, indeed



I pity him, how very disgraceful. Who's this coming, I wonder? how terrible if I should meet her, and she should insist on stopping me! She's off to meet him, I do believe.' (This sentence was a kind of recurrent burden, which ran to the sweet patter of the spinster's steps like the post-boy's gallop.) 'Off to meet him, off to meet him, meet him! O Aurelia Van, how very dreadful all this is! Such goings on would never have been thought of in my young days. She's off to meet him! She's turned the corner to the right, and I must hurry on a bit, or she may slip me. Where can the nasty flaunting thing be going to at such a pace? She's bound upon no good, I know, or else she wouldn't hurry so about it. I must duck behind this milk-man's cart; the artful thing is stopped, and looking round, as well you may; it shows a guilty mind, and proves the kind of trip you're out upon this morning: off to meet him, meet him, meet him! My gracious stars, and if she hasn't turned into our

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national collection ; though little is the natural history you ever studied, ma'am ; except it was the habits of the crocodile and cat, my sweet. She's a-going up the staircase now, and that I call outrageous. Degrading the repository of the nation's treasures into a convenience for her flirtation. She's turned into the mummy room, oh, how these stairs do make me catch my breath ; it isn't mummies you're after, my fine lady, though, I do believe, you'd be glad to see that excellent and worthy Mr Gow pickled into one and labelled regular. And now we pause, and look about us, as if we expected somebody. I see a young man there ahead, looking at some broken earthenware. You see him too, my dear, if I'm mistaken not, and down you pounce in his direction. I never saw such boldness. He turns ; I'm right ; Aurelia Van, you're right, it's him as plain as plain can be. Oh dear, oh dear, how very wicked people are ; I never should have credited that, and here in open daylight. Well,

and with all I do to keep them straight, and improve the morals of the age, till I'm nearly run off my legs, these things will go on in spite of me; though I do all I can to reform my neighbours. Oh dear, how long we are in shaking hands, how very glad we are to see each other, to be sure; I wish you'd get it over. I'm quite ashamed to see you stand pawing there in a public gallery. What that gentleman with a wand thinks of it all, I can't imagine. And off we go together now, as comfortable as if poor Mr Gow lay actually embalmed above-stairs in a glass case; which thank 'evens he is not, or I could never be able to write to him these scandalous proceedings. And well you may assist her down the stairs again, I almost expect the roof to tumble in upon us all, like Samson. There ain't no cause for being hoidenish; and, if the stairs are steep, you have no call to leap and frisk, as if you was a pretty darling at a boarding-school. Pah, get along, I'm thoroughly ashamed of both of

you, and what he ever finds to fascinate him in your blanket-coloured looks is more than I can guess? We're looking up now at the clock; you shake your head, my pretty dear, and he persuades you contrary. At last, you seem to be convinced, and off you go outside together. What makes you stop beyond the gates, and look up and down the street so? He'll have the grace to leave you now to return to your deluded husband. Oh, gracious me, I feel as if I could sink into the ground with shame at the sheer atrocity. I do declare they've hailed a cab, and off they race together in it. O Aurelia Van, this is the worst business you have ever assisted at; and I think, I may say, you have assisted at a good many such.'

After which running commentary on the movements of Clara and Brian, Aurelia returned greatly excited to Tavistock Street. She had already resolved with her sweet self, that, as the great moral reformer of the age, which character she had peculiarly

realized herself as fulfilling by that morning's work; it behoved her to inform Mr Stephen Gow, without delay, of the scandalous proceedings she had witnessed. About the most appropriate vehicle for such a communication she did not hesitate a moment. Anonymous letter-writing came as natural to Aurelia as a puddle of putrid water to a duck.

She produced some half-hour after her return to Tavistock Street the following effusion in a disguised hand :

‘ The writer, a well-wisher to Mr Stephen Gow, is able to prove the following statement. Mrs Gow left his house unattended this morning to keep an assignation with Mr Brian Sudgrove at the British Museum, thence they took a cab together northwards. The time the writer lost sight of them was about 11.15. It is suggested, that Mr Gow should ascertain from his servants the hour of his wife's return.’ Leaving this venomous document to bide its time to sting in the hands of the Post-

office authorities, we return to Brian and Clara Gow, who had embarked in a very slow cab for Memoria Lodge. Clara had been with difficulty persuaded to go and see Helen. She had nearly not proceeded to the Museum to meet Brian; she had gone at the last minute on impulse; but, when there with Brian, had become so nervous and uncomfortable, that she determined to return forthwith to Russell Square. Persuaded out of this, for the moment, by Brian, who was most anxious she should see Helen, she had reluctantly started with him. But, when about half way, her former feeling of nervousness returned to such an extent, that the expedition had to be abandoned by Brian; and the cab was put about, and told to make the best of its way to a street adjoining Russell Square, where Clara alighted and went the last few yards alone on foot. She promised Brian, however, to go with him again on some future day, when her husband's partisanship of Mr Sudgrove Senior

had somewhat softened, and Brian was fain to content himself with this concession.

When Stephen Gow returned from the city about six that evening, several letters by the two-penny post awaited him on the hall table.

These, the servant noticed, he took with him to open in a small back room on the ground-floor, in which he usually wrote and arranged household matters. After the lapse of about an hour the servant was summoned to the same apartment, and found his master plainly very much upset. Gow demanded a glass of water in quite an altered voice, and his hands shook so much, that the servant took upon himself to inform Clara, that he fancied his master was not very well.

Clara accordingly descended and entered in great trepidation.

‘Is anything wrong, Stephen?’ she cried.

The old man did not answer at first. His lips moved, but no sound came, and he seemed to shudder all over as she touched him.

‘Good Heavens! you are unwell? let me summon assistance.’

Stephen looked at her entreatingly, then just formed the word ‘Don’t,’ with an effort.

‘But we have fifty doctors within as many yards, Stephen.’

Stephen managed to stammer, ‘Not illness, misfortune.’

‘Thank Heavens for that,’ she murmured. ‘Some great trade reverse, I suppose. Don’t let that fret you. I shall never miss the money, for one.’

Stephen’s dry lips worked themselves into ‘n-no.’

‘What, then? in pity tell me,’ she entreated, leaning over him.

At last Stephen said,

‘Don’t speak to me for half-an-hour. I



have much to say to you then. Let me collect my strength for what I must speak. I shall need all I can muster.'

So husband and wife sat silently looking at each other.

Half-an-hour of terrible suspense, during which Clara saw him gradually rally and become his self again.

'Now, Clara, I am nerved for this,' he said at the end of the interval. 'I can face this now—but can you?' this with a touch of the old tender manner.

'I, Stephen, what can you mean? I am well and strong enough,' she replied.

All the tenderness gone at a flash with her answer; and an angry half-furious old man evidently creeping up behind the faded tenderness. Clara saw the change, yet could not for the life of her explain it yet.

'Read this,' he croaked harshly, tossing it over to the table to her, 'read this, Mrs Stephen Gow, and have the goodness to tell me every word of it is false.'

It had come now, the vague disaster she had shaped so long both in dream and in waking vision. This, then, was the form in which her enemies would overwhelm her. This nervous, sensitive woman had very little fear about her, though she saw clearly that her old husband was half beside himself with jealous frenzy.

‘Stephen, they are stated with the malice of a fiend, but the main facts are correct.’

‘And you dare to tell me this without a trace of shame, a vestige of penitence?’ he demanded with increasing fury.

‘You are not quite yourself, Stephen,’ she interposed, becoming indignant on her part. ‘I am ready to make allowance, for your having been worked up against me by the most bitter malice, that ever pursued a helpless woman. Still, this is not the way I choose to be spoken to, even as your wife.’

‘When you conduct yourself as my wife should, you shall then be spoken to as my wife ought to be addressed,’ said

Gow, twisting his fingers into knots. 'Can a woman, who runs after a young scapegrace, who has been turned out of her husband's doors, claim much matronly respect?'

'It was imprudent, I allow, Stephen,' she replied, looking wistfully at him. 'I will humble myself so far to you. Be content with this, and do not bear me too hard. I am proud in my own way too. A rupture between us two will not be healed in a day. Take what I repeat, Stephen, and be content. I am sorry, that I have been imprudent. There!'

'Hear her,' cried Stephen, stiffening with rage; 'hear this precious wife of mine. Now, does she not carry it off with an easy graceful carelessness? Pray, Mrs Gow, if disappearing in a cab with this young scamp is mere imprudence, inform me at what point a husband ought to interfere?'

'Scold me, Stephen,' she entreated,

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‘only don’t be ironical. I am over-sensitive, and shall become as unreasonable as you are.’

‘Pity, that these exquisite susceptibilities of yours,’ fumed Gow with dilated pupils, ‘did not suggest to you, that you were laying yourself open to some trifling misconstruction. May I presume to inquire the direction of this mysterious journey?’

‘Why should I answer?’ rejoined Clara, erect and very pale. ‘Your brutal words show you have ceased to trust me. You have no right to question in that tone, as little right to think as you do about me. It is time I returned to my own people. You will regret this some day, Stephen.’

‘To your people you shall surely go,’ sneered Stephen, his chest heaving and a nervous twitch about his mouth-corners, ‘if you refuse to tell me where you went with Sudgrove.’

‘Stephen,’ she rejoined, quietly folding

her hands,' I went nowhere. We merely drove about. Somewhere I was going with him ; but I had a presentiment of your unreasonable humours, and I gave it up ; lest you should return meanwhile, and work yourself into one of your usual jealous fidgets, when I am not there at your elbow to wait upon you.'

'A likely tale to put me off with,' hissed Stephen, at intervals choking with emotion, 'the ready answer of an adept. What does it matter? I have heard enough from your own lips to justify me. You knew you were doing wrong ; else why, even in your own story, did you hurry your return? I care not to probe this business deeper. You shall return to your own people. Many husbands would adopt even a harsher course.'

'So be it, Stephen,' she assented sadly, but with a stately resolution. 'You have dealt me the cruel measure of a jealous and a furious man. In a few days, when

you have worked off this frenzy, you will see, that all that I have done amounts really to very little.'

'Your conduct has been utterly unworthy of my wife. You do not improve your case by any attempted extenuation,' exclaimed Gow fiercely, and he sank down at the table, and buried his face in his hands.

'Hear me out, Stephen ; perhaps you will never hear me again,' she went on with a strange light upon her face. 'I go to my own home. Indeed, after your reproaches, how could I have remained and ruled this house? I should have felt, that the meanest servant in it was more trusted than the wife. It is better, then, in every way, that I should go. As to the rest, Stephen, I can look you in the face, and speak without even drooping my eyelids before you. Brian Sudgrove—you need not wince, Stephen, at the name—was my earliest friend, he was almost a brother to

me; certainly I place him even now next after Hood.'

'Spare me, at least, this catalogue of his virtues,' broke out Stephen wildly.

'I am going, Stephen,' she persisted, 'and I must be allowed my own defence. When you closed your doors on Brian Sudgrove, you told me you did so, because you could not afford to disoblige his father. I am convinced now, that you really wished to gratify your own unreasonable jealousy. This I did not dream of then; I thought better of you. Then came my difficulty. Was I to throw over an old friend, whom every one had turned against, because my husband went against the man that was down? I decided "No." Perhaps, I was imprudent. Malicious spies magnified the details to an unreasonable and violent man. Words and insinuations have been levelled at me, which a drayman's wife would resent, and which scarcely a carter would employ; and I

return to my people; and this terminates the history of an union, ill-assorted, Heaven knows, from the beginning.'

'Do you cast my years in my teeth? Must they be your excuse?' panted Stephen, convulsively.

'You knew our family was bound to you hand and foot,' proceeded Clara. 'You made a mere girl your wife, who had no choice in the matter. This you knew; and more, that every instinct of filial obedience, every motive of monetary obligation, made it impossible for that girl to say no. She has tried to do her duty these many weary years. Her heart has often sank within her, at her wasted youth and monotonous future. One by one, her own people have been struck with disaster. Still she wrestled on, poor wretch. She had one friend in the world; a boy she had known since childhood. One day she finds her doors are closed upon him. She ventures to see her friend



once again, and her husband thrusts her from his doors.'

And, thus having spoken, Clara Gow left the room; and returned to the house of her invalid brother, Hood Comper, a few hours afterwards.





## CHAPTER IV.

A PÆAN, A PROPOSAL, AND A COUNCIL OF  
WAR.

**T**HIS is the pæan which Aurelia Van sang, or rather jerked out to herself, on the pavement of Russell Square that night, like a modern Bloomsbury Deborah; as she watched, with exulting eyes, Clara Gow's trunks being brought out and tied on the top of a cab.

‘He’s going to send her home, and serve her richly right; he’s going to pack her off like a dismissed housemaid—and so perish all your enemies, O Aurelia!’

I don't expect her spirit will be quite so high, as when she wouldn't accept my hand upon the pavement here. She's going off with corded boxes, and not a scrap, I am happy to say, of character. As pale a piece of insipid rubbish as ever it fell to my lot to witness. All your doing, my dear Aurelia; at this rate you will regenerate the age and Bloomsbury in no time. You are the great moral reformer; and after you, I fear, will not arise another at all your equal. You unseal the eyes of deluded husbands; you teach unsuspecting parents the matrimonial games of their first-born; and, I regret to say, considering the sensation you create, your emolument is inconsiderable. But, never mind; the virtuous breast derives enjoyment from the contemplation of its own labours; and, though it's rather cold about the streets to-night, and the gaslights have a nasty spasmodic way of flaring up; yet the grateful sight of them there corded boxes, and her returning home in this disgraceful

plight, warms the cockles of your heart, and makes you impervious to the inclemency of the climate. O Aurelia Van, Aurelia Van! your enemies are scattered like chaff before you! I expect, there is a peculiar providence about it, especially as your father was a bachelor of divinity. You are the great moral regenerator of the age; I expect it won't be easy to replace you. Deluded husbands will then sleep in peace, and sons be allowed, unwatched, to marry with the smallest tradesmen.'

This beautiful effusion having terminated with the rumbling away of the cab, Aurelia Van retired to Tavistock Street, like a giant refreshed in spirit, by this triumphal deliverance. It was a beautiful and touching trait in this lady's character, that even the hours immediately succeeding her greatest achievements were never drowsed away in repose and inaction. One triumph made her only thirst the more, like Alexander, for additional laurels; and, we believe, that could her untiring

energy have succeeded in setting everybody by the ears in Bloomsbury, she would have immediately yearned to extend her beneficent influence to, say, Tyburnia. Therefore, let it be recorded, that even on her way home from singing Pæan over poor Clara's abrupt departure, she imagined yet a crowning touch to the glorious achievement she was then exulting over. So, on re-entering her lodgings, she grasped a pen, and succeeded in producing a further anonymous epistle in every respect worthy of her previous reputation.

‘Is Mrs Rainbird aware, that there has been a disgraceful scandal, on account of Mr Brian Sudgrove's attentions to a married lady of the name of Gow? In consequence of this young man, engaged, the writer believes, to Mrs Rainbird's daughter, Mr Gow has sent back his wife to her own relatives. The writer is unwilling, that the happiness of a beautiful and innocent girl

should be trifled with, and begs to subscribe himself, from prudential motives,

‘A FRIEND TO MORALITY.’

‘Stay,’ mused Aurelia, struck by a sudden thought as she was about to fold this missive, ‘am I not just a turn too sharp, may I not cut my own fingers in sending this? If the Rainbirds are respectable enough to discard Mr Brian for this scandal, the rock of offence removed between them, he might be reconciled with his father. Miles Sudgrove would forgive him a scandal, which is evanescent, but not misalliance, which is permanent. Well reasoned, Aurelia; now let me try it another way. I believe, I wrote this to vex that set-up girl with the pinky cheeks, and ridiculously thick hair, like a negro’s; only it trails about over everything so untidily. But, consider, father and son reconciled, my cherished Georgina’s schemes go to the wall; and that restless little climbing brute

of hers will have to open his oyster for himself in the world, and drop the silver spoon from his baby lips. Georgina has used me very shabbily, no question of that. Yet I'd rather she came in of the two. For, if Mr Brian got again into favour, and old Sudgrove dropped off soon, and really he looks very broken lately; Brian might marry the pinky-white girl, and have the money besides, and I couldn't stand her in Russell Square on any terms. I don't care. I'll chance it! I can't be baulked of my pleasure in despatching this for anybody. I do so long to make that minx with the hair and slender hands nearly beside herself with jealousy. I needn't have much delicacy about that Pipechick, who uses me like a dog. This shall go; and let them settle it as best they can among themselves. That's no business of mine. I merely write the truth.'

So Aurelia Van, never wearied in the cause of morality, sallied forth yet again, and launched this second unclaimed arrow

of hers towards Memoria Lodge. Then she retired to her ambrosial rest, and was able, like the celebrated despot of Rome, on laying her head upon her pillow, to reflect that she had not lost a day.

This same day, devoted by the sweet maiden censor to the repression of vice, had been employed by Dovey Snewing and Georgina Pipechick in a long conversation of which the following is a fragment.

‘My dear Mrs Pipechick,’ said Snewing, dusting his patent leather boots with a silk pocket handkerchief, ‘I have called to-day for a special purpose. Why should I dissemble? Let us be frank together. You are aware, Mrs Pipechick, (may I say Georgina Pipechick?) that there has long been an undefinable something in my bearing towards you, which marked you out from the female crowds which vainly strove to win my eye; and which might, had you deigned to notice it, have revealed a fluttering secret.’



‘What,’ replied Mrs Pipechick, fanning herself with a Chinese handscreen, ‘this fluttering secret may be, let us not pause to inquire. I am sure, I am very much obliged to any gentleman, who is kind enough to hint, that he has a fluttering secret; but it may save further misconception to explain, that my heart is divided between the tombs and Alfred Ahasuerus.’

‘Revoke,’ entreated Snewing, ‘your dismal, but at the same time most creditable, resolution.’

‘Are you aware, Mr Snewing,’ repeated Mrs Pipechick, ‘I did not go into grays till four months after the usual time? I made myself extremely hideous for a period far exceeding the ordinary regulation for bereavement. Pipechick, I regret to say, was found by his executors to have muddled everything available away, in a manner which was peculiarly exasperating to his survivors; but I am thankful, that I did not go a single crape flounce less deep on that account. If my lamented one

could inspect the books of Messrs Blots and Blower's mourning warehouse, I think that the heaviness of my account at that establishment, during my early widowhood, might prove a melancholy consolation to my impalpable Davis. Excuse my dwelling on these domestic details, Mr Snewing, which I have not mentioned in any spirit of self-laudation. Perhaps I am not wholly unrewarded for what I then endured ; in feeling now, that my cherub Alfred will one day become a light among the permanent landed aristocracy—'

'Believe me,' interposed Snewing, 'that, when some faint rumour reached me of the change in Mr Sudgrove's will, I made the bitter, but emphatic vow, never again to intrude myself upon your presence, Georgina. Yet, I debated with myself, she must know how long, how hopelessly, I have adored her, before there was any question of acres and settlements. Therefore, I resolved, it was false delicacy to absent myself on that account. A friend

to whom I hinted my perplexity—why should I not name him? the noble-hearted Worboys,—reassured me also by suggesting, that my own income was amply sufficient to trample under foot all unworthy suspicions of my motives; his words ran to this effect: “No one can accuse you, Snewing, of being an adventurer.” I returned, that no man was likely to do so twice without severe punishment. Worboys was much affected by this passage in our friendship. In fact so was I. The result being, that I calmed my trembling irresolution, and fled, dear Georgina, to your feet.’

‘O Mr Snewing, what can I say? What will the tombs say?’ questioned Georgina, with a slight tendency to relent.

‘You will need a manly arm,’ protested Snewing, ‘to bear you up in prosperity. Tombs are very good things in their way, but they are not generally of a supporting nature. Your sweet and engaging encumbrance up-stairs will be growing up too much for you in no time, without some

one to sustain you in fond parental firmness. Reward my devotion. I have adored you for ages, and called upon you assiduously for the last eighteen months.'

'Can I desert a memory?' murmured Mrs Pipechick with some vagueness and more irresolution. 'Can I rise from my watch by a sepulchre and bind on a fresh orange wreath?'

'My good soul,' persuaded Snewing, 'the late Pipechick would have been the last person in the world to have objected, could we have put the case properly before him. A reasonable man was Pipechick, not without his touch of poetry and romance. An inward poet, we may say, for, except his composition with his creditors, he has left us no remains. Put the case. Here is his lovely widow and tender orphan blossom—You are a lovely widow, you know—'

'O Mr Snewing,' blushed the inconsolable, suffering the insinuating wooer to detain her hand.

‘Well, given a fascinating widow, a climbing orphan, and a devoted admirer,’ propounded Snewing, ‘and the result must be, what? Matrimony, of course, by all the rules of logic and human nature.’

‘But what will people say?’ expostulated Georgina Pipechick faintly.

‘People will be civil enough, since you have got heaps of money coming in,’ returned Snewing with a charming air of innocent candour.

‘What a mercenary world it is,’ sighed Mrs Pipechick. ‘How heartless people are.’

‘I grieve to say, that you are correct,’ returned Snewing, with effusive frankness. Adding promptly, ‘All but one, but one,’ in a mellow and emotional murmur.

‘Where can that excepted individual be found?’ lisped the widow plaintively.

‘In the direction of King Street,’ smiled her admirer, ‘and under the name of Dovey. Give him a trial. He is not your mercenary sort. His chief failing is an

excess of heart. We will correct that—in time. Make the poor fellow the happiest of men. He deserves it, richly. I should just think he did.’

‘How can a fragile and bereaved creature,’ sobbed the widow, ‘know where to trust?’

‘Georgina,’ expostulated Snewing, ‘you need not decide. Let me decide for you. Behold, in the tumult of my feelings, how little I can bear to be doubted:’ and he lifted her hand, heavy with glittering metal, in a manner, which that worthy gentleman’s enemies might have called melodramatic; and, laying the hand aforesaid against the side of his double-breasted waistcoat, there he retained it, rings and all, for the present.

‘Dear Mr Snewing,’ sighed the dark-browed widow, casting down her eyes, ‘this is very sudden.’

Which, considering she had been ready to accept Snewing any day during the last six months, was a statement to be re-

ceived with some degree of allowance.

‘The fervour of my affection must plead excuse for my abruptness,’ returned Snewing, with extreme glibness, yet rather as if he were saying it out of a copy-book. ‘Don’t agitate yourself, Georgina, don’t tremble—’

Mrs Pipechick, who had sat hitherto as firm as a rock, here indulged in a stage shudder, to which the various bangles and chains she wore gave increased effect.

‘She trembles,’ cried Snewing, ecstatically, ‘she trembles at her own Dovey, like a wounded fawn or a young gazelle; her pulse is going like clock-work, and my disclosure has been too much for her in every respect.’

‘Dovey,’ whispered Mrs Pipechick, leaning her head between his ear and his coat-collar, ‘do not press me for an answer. My heart is in the tombs. My late Pipechick was all that is calculated to ensnare a woman’s doting love. He left me, as I have remarked, slenderly provided for, but

I can never hope to replace him. When I see a similarity between them, in a droop of the left eyelid of my Alfred Ahasuerus, then I say, I will exist wholly for that sweet infant's welfare. Therefore, Mr Snewing, do not entreat me to reverse my irrevocable decision.'

And, by way of concluding the subject, Mrs Pipechick proceeded to lean the whole of her not inconsiderable weight upon the shoulder of her admirer.

'Hear me, I entreat you, Georgina; give your playful cherub a new father to watch over his interests. Force your own inclinations for that dear climber's welfare.'

'It is true, I require some one to lean upon,' she sighed, and it was evident she did, for Dovey was beginning to give way beneath her. 'It is true, that, under a recent family arrangement, my smiling innocent will, when I am laid beside Pipechick, inherit vast territorial possessions. But wedded to the memory of my Pipechick, what would wealth advantage me?'



interrogated Mrs Pipechick with a sublime glance upwards. 'Yet I seem to see those little orphan hands entreating me to give them a new papa.'

'Which you will lose no time in doing, eh? my own,' persuaded Dovey, giving her a kind of heave; in hopes of edging off some of the weight sideways on to the sofa-cushion.

'You distinctly understand that my heart is laid in Barking Cemetery,' she rejoined.

'I am perfectly and completely aware of it,' agreed Snewing, in his most impressive going-to-church manner.

'And that only racking fears for my infant's future,' she sighed, 'drive me to this step.'

'I will watch that child,' insisted Snewing, 'like a—a policeman.'

'More tenderly than that, Dovey,' she simpered.

'I meant as closely, my dear,' he corrected.

‘And that the image of my lost Pipechick, as he beguiled my maiden fancy in pumps and a velveteen shooting jacket, must still reign supreme in my widowed bosom’—

‘I couldn’t think of pushing him out,’ he assented.

‘Then,’ and she came down with crushing effect upon him as she said it, almost flattening him against the sofa cushion, ‘I am content to reward the fidelity of years. Lead me again, my Dovey, an unwilling victim to the hymeneal rails; and, I should venture to suggest, that, in the present uncertain state of Mr Sudgrove, the sooner the ceremony can come off the better.’

While Georgina Pipechick lent no unwilling ear in the drawing-room to the blandishments of the charmer Snewing, Miles Sudgrove was closeted with Gilbert Noyes and Podster in the study. How Podster, that Ulysses of resource, became associated as a third in the inmost family

councils of the house of Sudgrove, we shall in due time explain.

‘And now, Noyes,’ began Sudgrove, unbuttoning the upper button of his waist-coat. ‘I will trouble you to put the case in as few words as may be to Podster.’

‘Being your land-agent, I presume,’ returned Noyes drily, eyeing Podster with some doubt and more curiosity. ‘Excuse my saying it, Mr Sudgrove, but this association of Mr Podster in our deliberation was wholly unlooked-for by me.’

‘Don’t mind me, Mr Noyes,’ cried Podster, with affable cheeriness. ‘We can never come into any collision. You’re a great legal light; I’m a nobody. Land-agent to-day, only a bagman yesterday. A waif and stray, who has to turn his hand to anything. A mere bird of passage, beneath the dignity of any regular practitioner to be jealous of. Stable in nothing, except that I’ll do my best for my employer for the time being, and pull him

through any difficulty that is fordable by any kind of expedient.'

Noyes perused the speaker narrowly from head to foot, and knit his brows to solve some mental problem, as he tried to read Podster's bluff countenance. At length the attorney's brow cleared, and he came forward with his hand out.

'Mr Podster, you have disarmed me by your good humour. I am glad to make your acquaintance.'

'That's well,' pursued Sudgrove. 'I foresaw, you would suit each other to an inch. No one can resist Podster. If any one can pull me through, Podster can. Why, a man that can sew a shirt-button on without a moment's warning, with a crowd cheering below, I believe could do anything—take Gibraltar or turn a piano-forte leg.'

'We'll take care of you, Mr Sudgrove,' laughed Podster. 'Now, Mr Noyes, what's the nut we have to crack? Bothers,' added

Mr Podster, with a grin, 'divide themselves into two heads—bothers arising from law, and bothers arising from women. Which have we to disentangle?'

'Didn't I tell you, Noyes,' exclaimed Sudgrove, surveying Podster with admiration, 'that he'd know all about it before we opened our mouths? This is the man whose railway fare from Cornwall you said was not worth the expense! Podster hits the right nail. It's a woman's bother first, and a law mess at the top of it. Give it him shortly, Noyes, and reserve nothing.'

It was quite touching to see the child-like confidence with which the burly and blustering Miles Sudgrove regarded Podster. It reminded one of the single keeper, who can enter the cage of some peculiarly awkward animal at the Zoological Gardens; and push him about, while the brute only blinks at him in a friendly and helpless manner.

'For lucidity, Mr Podster,' spoke Noyes, clearing his throat, 'I purpose be-

ginning at the wrong end. Let's work backwards, and make the last transaction, in point of time, the first in narrative.'

Podster produced a stump of pencil, and a little hunch of paper from his waistcoat pocket.

'Within the last few days, Mr Sudgrove has executed a will,' continued Noyes. 'It passes over Mr Brian Sudgrove, and leaves Orpwood to Mrs Pipechick for life and to her son in tail. The unconverted personal estate devolves in the same manner.'

'Why passed over?' demanded Podster in a business tone.

'Because Mr Brian is about to marry the daughter of a mechanic,' returned Noyes.

'Trade?' asked Podster, biting his pencil stump.

'A species of stonemason.'

'Ah,' said Podster simply.

'It is not the kind of will,' resumed Noyes, with a decided jerk of his head, 'I

should have advised Mr Sudgrove to make. Never mind that, however. Our main difficulty is, whether Mr Sudgrove has any right to make a will at all ; or, to put it more logically, to how much property Mr Sudgrove's power of devising extends.'

'The deuce,' replied Podster, and gave a low whistle.

'Mr Sudgrove,' said Noyes, indicating that gentlemen like a lecturer with a paper-knife, 'derived the great bulk of his property under the supposed intestacy of his elder brother. Only a short time back he and I turned up that brother's will.'

'No, you turned it up, Noyes,' corrected Sudgrove ; I 'should never have noticed it till doomsday.'

Podster made his first note with the stump.

'This will bequeathed the large funded property of the testator,' explained Noyes, chequing it off on his fingers, 'to his child by a woman called Melusina Baker ; she receiving a large annuity during her life.'

This annuity has been paid her, by Mr Sudgrove's desire, ever since this document turned up. Her son is at present not forthcoming, having absconded to Australia.'

'It's about as nice a mess as I ever heard.' This was Podster's verdict, and he delivered it with most refreshing coolness.

'Can you pull me through this, Podster?' demanded Sudgrove, with a look of entreaty.

'Is there any doubt about this new-found will's genuineness?' propounded Podster, turning to Noyes.

'None,' exclaimed Sudgrove and Noyes in one breath.

'What a comfort, if Mrs Baker's son would have the good taste to die in the bush,' meditated Podster.

Sudgrove's eyes echoed the sentiment.

'One word more,' resumed Noyes, 'the natural course would have been to prove this will; but, the chief claimant under it



having disappeared, Mr Sudgrove was unwilling to publish for a short time this family scandal. I acceded so far, as to remain passive for a month or so, Mrs Baker being paid meanwhile without question. Now the time is up, and the question is, how are we to proceed ?'

'And, I'm sure, this has preyed upon me day and night,' chimed in Sudgrove ; 'and, added to my son's folly, the whole affair has shaken me very much.'

'Allow me to say, Mr Sudgrove,' said Noyes, with a wave of the paper-cutter, 'that your temperament is restless, and subject to continual irritation. You should take things more calmly. You are certainly not looking well.'

'It's these continual headaches,' fumed Sudgrove, 'that wear me out.'

'See Dr Bull,' suggested Noyes.

'Now then, Podster,' inquired Sudgrove briskly, 'what on earth is to be done?'

'I must sleep upon this,' replied Pod-

ster, pocketing stump and paper, 'and have a talk with Mr Noyes by himself. I shall have to catechise him about your late brother, in a way that you would not relish to hear.'

'Do you think there is any chance of our disproving the document?' hurried out Sudgrove.

'I think nothing yet,' rejoined Podster, drily, with an air of reservation.

'Can I see you to-morrow, Podster?' repeated Sudgrove.

'That depends on my talk with Mr Noyes,' reasoned Podster. 'If I find I shall have any inquiries to make in person, I cannot bring my answer till a later date.'

'You see, Mr Podster,' announced Noyes in conclusion, 'that, in the present uncertain state of things, I regard it as peculiarly unfortunate, that Mr Sudgrove should have taken upon himself to make a new will. In fact, between ourselves, Mr Brian's omission and Mrs Pipechick's insertion must, of course, be purely pro-

visional, on the result of our next few months' inquiries.'

'Well, but I might drop off,' suggested Sudgrove gloomily, 'before the thing was settled. And I'm determined, that, as far as I'm concerned, this stonemason's daughter shall never go to Orpwood.'





## CHAPTER V.

### RICE-PUDDING AT FISH-STREET HILL.

**P**ODSTER and Noyes emerged from Sudgrove's house in Russell Square together.

'I believe Mr Sudgrove is breaking fast,' hazarded Podster.

'I don't see so much difference as that,' returned Noyes, 'still he doesn't look well.'

'Our ways lie together,' observed Podster.

'In more senses than one,' retorted Noyes, with a sprightly assumption of humour. 'I foresee, we shall have a good deal to do in company, so let us make the

best of each other. Why not come home with me now, and share my homely chop and rice-pudding at dinner? I'm a man of system, Mr Podster; and this is chop and rice-pudding day at Fish-street Hill. The honours are done, not mentioning that which you will do us by coming, by my only daughter. She's been rather out of sorts lately, or I think I might venture to predict, you would find her entertaining, and, I may add, captivating.'

'I'll come with gratitude,' assented Podster, 'the problem of dinner was just becoming serious.'

They went on some paces in silence.

'Sudgrove's new will is a mistake,' hazarded Podster, reverting abruptly to business as they strolled along.

'Hugely erroneous,' concurred Noyes. 'This Mrs Pipechick, the new life-tenant, is in the hands of a shy *entourage*.'

'This will must get her married again, if it oozes out,' grinned Podster.

'If so, I can guess the rascal she will

select,' mused Noyes. 'She's as hard as nails, and as selfish as Lucifer; yet there is the strangest current of vanity and folly underlying her whole character.'

'She must guess her money will be the main inducement to this man,' reasoned Podster.

'He's a clever scamp enough,' pursued Noyes; 'he and I have crossed swords once or twice, metaphorically, of course. He bears me no love, I can warrant you.'

'The woman would hardly be such a fool,' observed Podster.

'Let us drive the rest of the way, or my French cook may be kept waiting,' cried Noyes, facetiously.

They reached Fish-street Hill sufficiently early to prevent the chops attaining an undue brownness. Selina received her father's guest in smiles, and a square-cut black silk body with blue facings. She still wore a thin gold necklet, from which depended a locket, containing a miniature photograph of the perfidious Vincent. Miss

Noyes had lately assumed an habitual expression of interesting desolation, and indulged herself in the very lowest of spirits.

‘Delightful spot this, Miss Noyes,’ commenced Podster, when the three were seated at their repast, ‘so very central. You ascend the Monument often?’

‘We natives know better,’ replied Selina archly; ‘it’s an emblem of human life, I always think. A good deal of vexation to get to the top, and you feel so very uncomfortable when you are there.’

‘I saw two privates in the Life-guards,’ mused Podster, ‘go up just now, straps and spurs and all. One understands now how we conquered India; and why the Alpine club, and similar institutions, seem to take such root in English society.’

‘There’s that dear ballad of Longfellow’s, you know,’ suggested Selina with a sigh, ‘that gives one the reason of going up-hill so beautifully.’

‘I don’t mind a Devonshire hill so much,’ allowed Podster, ‘but when it comes

to devils' bridges and perpendicular ice and granite, then I, as a modest collector of rents, don't aspire any further.'

'So you are fresh from Devonshire, Mr Podster?' she inquired; 'how fortunate you are to reside in that delicious climate of the west!'

'I am in general too busy in stirring up Mr Sudgrove's new tenantry to attend much to climate, Miss Noyes,' smiled Podster. 'I habitually come home wet; so I conclude it's dampish.'

'You don't wander much among the wild flowers, then?' demanded Selina in a manner at once pensive and emotional.'

'I'm afraid I've been a little backward in that respect at present,' stammered Podster, 'but I intend to make it up when I get back.'

'You don't sit for hours among the sea-side rocks, and watch the clouds, and the wild birds;—I should,' pursued Selina with a sigh.



‘Really,’ mused Podster, ‘this young woman’s depression is alarming.’

‘I’m sorry to say, I haven’t just as yet,’ he added aloud, ‘I believe the thing is generally done at Penshingle, but they mostly pelt soda-water bottles.’

‘Is Penshingle a Cornish watering-place?’ asked Selina.

‘Most romantic spot,’ cried Podster, becoming animated. ‘The scenery, according to the guide-book, reminds the tourist of the coast of Piedmont. Not having been there, I can’t be reminded. But, for bathing-machines and donkeys, I have seldom seen its equal.’

‘Delicious,’ murmured Selina; ‘let us go there this autumn, papa.’

‘The young women there,’ meditated Podster, ‘do run into rocks and blue uglies in a manner quite surprising. They lie about on the beach in a way which is intensely aguish, I may say, to contemplate. Take one, Miss Ann Stalker, now, a young lady whose acquaintance I’ve

made lately ; I've known her lie on her face in a brine puddle chipping away at a pie-bald jelly-fish upwards of twenty minutes.'

'Is she lovely?' questioned Selina, absently turning up her eyes. 'Is she lovely and deserted? I hope, Mr Podster,' she added after a pause, with keen emphasis, 'that she is lovely and deserted!'

'Most dismal girl this,' thought Podster. 'No, Miss Noyes, Ann is a turn too old to be deserted ; that is, to get a chance of being done so. And, as for lovely, we'll take Clara Stalker ; she's a sweet thing with a fresh blush, and not deserted either ; for a young chap down there has been paying her a good deal of attention lately.'

'Tell me all about it, Mr Podster,' entreated Selina, ecstatically. 'Tell me how these young hearts enjoy their brief play-time. I take a mournful interest in this halcyon period of delusion. How do they look, what do they say to each other?'

‘Chaff,’ replied Podster; ‘a deal of chaff.’

‘And he,’ went on Selina, with added fervour, ‘when she left him for a few hours, did he roam the beach restless, with folded arms, disconsolate? O Mr Podster, tell me what he did?’

‘Mostly billiards,’ explained Podster.

‘Had he a noble brow and dangerously fascinating eyes?’ she ejaculated.

‘Without going to that extent,’ deliberated Podster, ‘he’s a tidy-looking boy enough, this Baker of hers.’

Selina gave a start in her chair, and became rigid. ‘What an agonizing coincidence,’ she murmured with parted lips.

Podster felt Noyes kick him beneath the table; plainly he had stumbled inadvertently on delicate ground.

‘It’s a very common name, my dear, interposed Noyes, soothing her, and frowning at Podster over her shoulder; ‘I suppose there are, let us say, a baker’s dozen

of the name in every English county. Not bad that, Podster, eh ?'

'What was his Christian name, Mr Podster ?' panted Selina, convulsively clasping her hands. 'Be merciful, and do not prolong my suspense.'

'The plague of it is,' stammered Podster, with his hand to his forehead, and ruffling his hair back as a goad to recollection, 'that it has slipped me clean.'

'That's a pity,' reasoned Noyes, 'for this silly girl will be firmly persuaded, there can be but one Baker in the universe.'

'Stay, it isn't a common name,' repeated Podster, casting up and down like a mnemonic retriever. 'I have it now—Victor—no, not quite, Vin—Vincent—that's it!'

The fair Selina instantly went off into a long-drawn hysterical howl.

Noyes rose hurriedly from his seat and rushed to her assistance.

‘Confound the girl,’ he roared, ‘and confound you, too; I mean, I beg your pardon, Podster. Here, bear a hand. Reach me that water-bottle and napkin, to dab her face over with.’

Selina struggled convulsively.

‘I wish you wouldn’t kick, my dear,’ expostulated Noyes. ‘I do believe your howls will bring my small house down. It can’t be your Vincent Baker. He must be sitting in a colonial bush at the present moment. How could he be flirting at Penshingle then?’

‘No, no, no!’ gasped Selina; ‘he is fickle and false, and miserably perjured!’ and the howls redoubled.

‘What the deuce shall we do?’ fidgeted Noyes; ‘best have the cook up. Just stand on the stairs and bellow “Lobbs,” there’s a good fellow. Stay, has this Vincent Baker a seam on his upper lip?’

‘To be sure; he told me himself a stone had done it,’ said Podster, promptly.

‘Not a word more, then, to her when

she comes round,' insisted Noyes. 'By jingo, the girl is right. Then he never sailed in the Cerberus. To think of this oozing out through you! Well, this beats cock-fighting.'

'And who is this Baker?' demanded Podster, quite at home in helping to support a woman in hysterics, as he would have been in a balloon or the Balaclava charge. 'Come, hold up, Miss Noyes. She's coming round nicely. Try the smelling-salts— Who, as I was observing, is this very ordinary young man, as he seemed to me?'

'Why, look you here, Podster,' replied Noyes, still applying the salts, 'the minute we can leave this girl we must telegraph to Penshingle.'

'All right; I can work the wires for you,' cried Podster. 'Is he to be arrested, or what?'

'Not exactly,' replied Noyes. 'I know you can keep your tongue between your teeth.'

‘Few men better, I believe,’ returned Podster. ‘Though I was a bagman, I can keep a secret as well as a Lord Chancellor.’

‘And you won’t go rushing off with this news to Mr Miles Sudgrove,’ continued Noyes, ‘till we break it to him together.’

‘Sudgrove! Stay, I know he hates the name. Then this must be—’

‘The missing son of Turner Sudgrove, and my late clerk,’ rejoined Noyes. ‘Deuce take the girl, she always chooses the most inconvenient seasons for these outbreaks.’

Podster had recourse to his usual proceeding when extremely astonished; he merely pursed up his lips and whistled.

Leaving Noyes and Podster to get over their surprise, recover their fair Selina, telegraph for Vincent Baker; and then consult deep into the night, how they should best smooth their discovery to their patron, and, harder still, how advise him to act; we return to Memoria Lodge.

‘Kedge,’ demanded Mrs Rainbird, in a solemn voice, extending a letter, ‘did this come by the postal delivery?’

‘Yes, missis,’ responded Kedge drily, ‘and the hand-writing on the address seem took with the shivers.’

‘Reserve your comments, Kedge, upon my correspondence,’ snubbed her mistress, in a stony voice.

‘I put it to you, now, if that R hasn’t a cold in his head,’ demonstrated Kedge, unabashed, fixing a shaky capital letter with a very red fore-finger.

‘Silence,’ insisted Mrs Rainbird, sternly. ‘Summon your master from his monumental occupations, and say I desire to speak to him, if they are not too engrossing.’

She said this disdainfully, as if the preparation of tombstones was a light and harmless hobby of Samson’s, which she humoured, but could not regard in any serious light.

Samson entered—as usual, dusty, blinking, absent, up in the clouds.



‘Samson Rainbird, stand forth.’

This was Mrs Rainbird’s exordium to all impressing deliverances of hers. It meant, that Samson had best mind what he was after, and would be wise to recall himself from all wool-gathering propensities. It acted upon him like the word ‘attention’ on a drawn-up military company who stand at ease.

‘Samson Rainbird, I find I am generally right,’ she preluded.

Samson coughed behind his hand, and assented, ‘So you are, my dear—occasionally.’

‘Always!’ retorted his wife, sternly.

Samson coughed again, and remained silent.

‘Do you mean to say, you won’t answer me?’ she repeated with some unfairness.

‘As to your being right, my dear?’ hazarded Samson.

‘Come, Rainbird, really any stranger would say you were a zany,’ she protested, by way of a re-assuring remark.

‘You wished to speak to me?’ he reminded, in a patient tone.

‘Bless the [man, he’s only just found that out,’ she exclaimed; ‘and high time I should speak, too—ay, and be minded;’ and her voice scaled higher at the sentence’s conclusion.

‘What’s amiss?’ he asked, nervously; ‘nothing about Helen, is it?’

‘Everything about Helen,’ she echoed, ‘and only yourself to thank, and your sullen obstinacy, if that consoles you.’

‘Dear, dear,’ retuned Samson, chafing his hands, ‘shall we never get right? I do hope now, my love, you haven’t been driving her just a turn too hard.’

Mrs Rainbird scanned him all over; with a contemptuous movement of the head, to announce the result and completion of her survey.

‘I may have my faults,’ proceeded she, with a generous allowance.

‘Not at all, my dear,’ murmured Samson, shifting from leg to leg.

‘With all I have to bear,’ she resumed, grim and unpropitiated, ‘no one, with common humanity, would take a fiendish delight in contradicting me to my face.’

‘As you please,’ said Samson, scraping his chin doubtfully.

‘I said,’ she repeated, with her arms akimbo, ‘that I have my faults. I may have even driven daughters, as I’ve been accused of doing; though I was not aware I was a coachman. Some are ready enough to snap me up for every little trifle; and don’t seem to relish their meat, unless they can contradict one, that is too easily agitated to answer them. Daughters I may have drove,’ she repeated, returning to the charge, ‘but there is one thing people sha’n’t and can’t throw in my teeth; I never wished my driven daughters to take up with swindling thieves.’

‘Lord bless me, you can’t apply the term to Brian Sudgrove,’ fidgeted Samson.

‘I can, Mr Rainbird, and I do,’ she returned ; coolly adding, in a tone of assumed deference, ‘and the lie is between us.’

Now this was by no means a soothing mode of stating the position, especially as Mrs Rainbird said it in a matter-of-fact way ; as one gentleman might remind another that the wine decanter rested between them. Samson was sorely perplexed.

‘What has he thieved, my love?’ he hazarded with some timidity.

‘Thieved?’ snorted Mrs Rainbird, ‘loads!’

‘Heavy articles, my dear?’ suggested Samson, still distrusting his wife’s power of hyperbole.

‘Wives, marriage bonds, affections!’ she exclaimed, with a wide circuit of her arm, to denote a liberal order of such products. ‘I am a British matron, Mr Rainbird. I may be over-prudish. You won’t mind Brian Sudgrove’s taking off another man’s wife. I suppose you’ll think it rather

spirited in him than otherwise. Your moral tone has deteriorated of late. If you don't mind it, speak it out !'

'I don't believe a word of it,' returned Samson flatly.

'Thanking you again for your politeness,' she said rigidly, 'I remark that the lie is between us.'

'Do be reasonable, my dear. What are your grounds ?' he questioned, with a growing sense of uneasiness.

'I've grounds enough for St Paul's cathedral to stand on,' she proceeded loftily. 'Peruse, and tell me, if you dare, whether it isn't word for word, with some trifling variations to be sure, exactly what I predicted this wretched courtship would terminate in.'

Samson took the letter with trembling hands, and read it from end to end.

'Well, Mr Rainbird ?'

'This is most unpleasant,' began Samson, with a shake of his head, and a helpless sigh.

‘Yah, you idiot,’ broke in his wife, ‘are married women to be dragged from their homes, and is that all you can find to say about it?’

‘I should like to hear your opinion, my dear,’ he said, with his head on one side, to consider.

‘Then you listen to me,’ cried his wife fiercely. ‘What’s here? scandal’s here! married woman returned to her relatives is here! An innocent girl to be trifled away is here! Not that you care a brass halfpenny, I believe you’d trifle one yourself; and, if you want to get your ears boxed, you’d better try.’

‘We must hear Brian’s version, my love, before taking any decisive steps in this matter,’ urged Samson, with timorous wish to defend the absent.

‘There, I knew it,’ cried Mrs Rainbird, flinging her arms up; ‘I said, you’d be colloquing with him again at once, and consulting, and asking his advice. Ropes shall not make me address the wretch


again. I may be of no account, but if morality is to be trampled on in the best parlour, I shall, as a British matron, venture to remain above in the sleeping apartments.'

'My dear, I assure you we mean to be moral on both stories,' soothed Samson.

'Stand forth, Rainbird,' reiterated she; 'what did I predict of this very Sudgrove?'

'Beyond, my dear,' he stammered, 'your hurrying on the match when he was rich, and wishing to dismiss him since his reverses; which, you know, is more policy than prophecy; I can't exactly call to mind that you ever predicted anything; though, to be sure,' he added, temporizing and hedging, 'you might have done so to Loo, or even to Kedge; and I am not prepared to say, you didn't.'

'This man's memory is hopelessly impaired,' sighed Mrs Rainbird, tossing her head. 'One question more, sir. Is Sudgrove to marry Helen after this, or is he not?'



‘Clearly not, my dear, if he is as bad as this represents him,’ said Samson, with unusual firmness for him.

‘A faint gleam of reason I’ve been able to knock out of you at last,’ cried Mrs Rainbird, bouncing down exhausted into a chair; ‘your wits come and go like a dragon-fly. It’s weary work, for any delicate woman, to try and put sense into a healthy head like yours. It’s addle, addle, addle, all the mortal day.’

‘My dear,’ suggested Samson with the utmost mildness, ‘since you are invariably worse after going it, suppose we discuss this to-morrow.’

‘I shall be worse,’ went on Mrs Rainbird, ‘but I’ll do my duty, while I’m worsening, by the family; if I lie groaning all night for it, I’ll contradict you, while Providence spares me any voice. I’m not one to duck and cringe to low thieves, and try to shove my daughters off secretly upon them. It’s not for me, who always obeyed the fifth commandment, to go against the



verdict of people's own fathers. If they choose to send them to the work-house, it stands to reason, they must be wisest and most judicious, as parents always are. I don't chip all my wool-gathering wits away in carving sham virtues on to dead men's tombstones; and in crawling on my stomach before perfect Newgate Calendars of vices in live merchants' sons. I never did it yet, and upright I will go, while I am spared to talk at you. I don't set up to be so uncommonly fair and impartial, and for all that showing-off way you have. I don't need to stand twisting and twirling and debating, and going off from one foot to another, as if neither was good enough for me, though given us by Providence. If I hear one man has stole another's wife, shall I fall to calculating whether I'm to make the thief three bows or four? I'm not for petting and coquetting the feelings of stealers, (and much they have of them,) by any impartiality. Tell this Sudgrove your mind first, and make your inquiries after-

wards, since you are so curious. Don't look at me for helping you ; I'm a mother of children, leastways of one, and a fine-grown girl too, and I ain't going to pry into such things. Providence has blessed me with a voice—'

'It certainly has, my love,' said Samson, edging a word or two in sideways, while she paused to gasp for a moment.

'A voice to lift up, when I see girls trifled away like bean-stalks ; and, when I observe fathers of families making themselves conspicuous, by thinking so much of the feelings of house-breaking and wife-ticing vermin, then I am not one of your quiet ones.'

Which she certainly was not. At length, Mrs Rainbird's oratory seeming to run off to the dregs, Samson repeated,

'If Brian cannot clear himself our Helen shall not take him. What more can I say ?'

'Clear himself, indeed !' she echoed with contempt. 'Ask a cat to clear her-

self, who has fallen into a tar bucket! Shall I never be able to make you understand anything? Now, man, take a pen and write as I bid you.'

'But, my dear—'

'If you don't want to send me off in spasms, I give you notice you'd better not palter,' she pursued with a menacing aspect.

'Lord, bless me,' cried Samson, rushing to the ink-stand, much alarmed, 'I'm quite ready. Where are the pens? How can they get all this wool into their nibs? I'm awaiting your dictation, my dear.'

'Mr Samson Rainbird presents his compliments,' dictated his wife.

'I think I'll put it rather, "Dear Sudgrove,"' he hesitated.

'And dear he ought to be to you, after his last exploit,' she sneered. 'Come, put it down: "Mr Samson Rainbird presents his compliments—"'

'My own,' said Samson, looking up.

'Well.'

‘You see, I oughtn’t to compliment him either, on your principle.’

‘Pooh, pooh,’ denied his wife. ‘Get on: “to Mr Brian Sudgrove, and begs to suggest, that if Mr Sudgrove is unable to give Mr Rainbird a direct contradiction to a statement which has reached his ears; to the effect, that a married lady has been dismissed by her husband on Mr Sudgrove’s account; he must insist on the matrimonial engagement between Mr Brian Sudgrove and Miss Helen Rainbird being considered as finally terminated.”’

‘I don’t like this,’ said Rainbird, when he had done. ‘I had much rather have asked him face to face how much of this was unfounded.’

‘How considerate we are!’ snarled Mrs Rainbird. ‘I suppose, he is not too proud to write and defend his conduct. He shall never enter this humble abode, till he clears himself.’

‘Which he will do,’ said Rainbird.

‘Which he can’t do,’ replied his wife.



## CHAPTER VI.

### A DEATH VACANCY.

**N**OYES met Podster by agreement next morning, and they proceeded together to Russell Square.

‘Halloo! look here, Mr Podster,’ cried Noyes, as they reached the steps of Miles Sudgrove’s house, ‘you were more right than I was about this man’s health yesterday. See here, they’ve got their knocker tied up with a glove. Ring at once, please.’

‘You see, I was dresser in a hospital once,’ remarked Podster in the tone of

ordinary statement. 'Gives one practice, you know, and eye as to the state of a man.'

'The deuce you were,' said Noyes. 'I should like to know what you have not been, my friend?'

'A man with a hundred pounds in my purse at any one given time,' rejoined Podster, with a quiet smile.

'I hope Mr Sudgrove is not ill,' spake Noyes to Golland, who now stood in rather a dishevelled state at the open door.

'Ain't he though, sir, just neither,' retorted Golland, with that unction, that people assume when about to dilate on calamities. 'He was took at after his dinner last night with an appleplexious fit, and have never come to, that is to singlefy, sinst then. We're had three doctors with him continual, and they don't expect to get him round. I ain't been to bed all night, and I 'ope it may be remembered in my quarter's salary, if anything occurs.'

'Who is with him now?' asked Noyes.

'Dr Teazletwig, him as belongs to the

lemon-coloured brougham at the corner.'

'Has Mr Gow been sent for?'

'Mrs Pipechick, she 'ave sent for Mr Snewing,' communicated Golland, lowering his voice.

'You don't say so!' replied Noyes, also in a whisper. 'Of course Mr Sudgrove is much too unconscious to transact business.'

'You'd say so, if you saw him,' was the reply.

'Ah, well, this is most melancholy work,' pursued Podster.

'You and I, Podster, can be of no use here,' interposed Noyes. 'I say, Golland, mind you send me a messenger, if anything happens; meaning, of course, if one thing happens. I ought, as Mr Sudgrove's man of business, to be upon the premises at once. You had better send to Mr Gow as well. I shall go there hence, and apprise him of the state of things.'

So they walked away.

'Heigho,' said Podster, 'so this turns

me adrift again. I shall have had only a short spell at land-agenting. I wonder what I shall be next? Shall I be a photographer or a fencing-master? Well, I'm more than selfishly sorry about Sudgrove.'

'Lookee here, Podster,' said Noyes, taking him by the button; 'this woman Pipechick will give us trouble. She has sent for Snewing, you heard. Mark my words, they're engaged to be married already.'

'Snewing being the party you considered a rascal in your words to me yesterday,' threw in Podster.

'The word rascal is mildness itself to what that fellow is capable of,' insisted Noyes, tapping the pavement with his umbrella for emphasis. 'You see, she calls him in at once. Ah, my friend Snewing, if you only guessed there was a neat little will of Turner Sudgrove's, nestling comfortably under your nose in one of the sick man's despatch boxes; a tidy little document, which will take Orpwood neatly



enough from the rapacious fingers of yourself and your amiable lady, that is to be—I do believe you'd burn the house down, rather than it should come to light. But our strength, Podster, aha, is, that neither he nor she knows a word about it.'

'Then you really back in my friend Baker for Orpwood?' questioned Podster.

'You really believe this will of Turner's will stand fire and hold water?'

'Time will prove,' returned Noyes. 'Here we must part. This is Mr Gow's, my fellow-executor in Sudgrove's will. You understand, with this Snewing in the house, one of us ought to arrive, the moment after we have any right to do so. My co-executor is hardly sharp enough, and rather taken in just now by Snewing. Farewell for the present. I will keep you posted up at your hotel how Sudgrove does; but I presume the case is hopeless.'

So Noyes went in to consult with Stephen Gow, and Podster turned into Ox-

ford Street for a stroll, reflecting much on the mutability of human affairs.

Noyes soon concluded his visit to Gow, and returned forthwith, in the fleetest hansom he could find, to Fish-street Hill. Having satisfied himself, that Selina was nearly herself again, after the shock of yesterday's discovery, he applied himself strenuously to business till the evening. About six o'clock Vincent Baker arrived from Penshingle at the attorney's door. The telegram had been so worded, that the strongest inducements were held out to Vincent, to repair to Fish-street Hill without delay; but Noyes did not let out a word about Baker's prospects.

When Vincent entered the office, his late employer did not receive him overwarmly; and Baker himself was rather shame-faced concerning his visionary trip to the antipodes.

'So here you are,' said his master. 'I shan't waste my breath with censuring

you, but you've done a very foolish thing.'

'I can't defend it, sir,' allowed Baker; 'still, when a young fellow has been sent to the right-about by a girl he adores, he is ready to commit any extravagances.'

'I wish all the couples in your condition,' replied Noyes, with a serio-comic frown, 'could be sent to a kind of asylum district by yourselves, like convicts or lunatics; and that you'd have your quarrels and makings-up there by yourselves, without molesting sane and reasonable people.'

'And how,' demanded Baker, mysteriously pointing upwards, 'if my inquiry be not deemed intrusive, is she?'

'I wish with all my heart,' returned Noyes, with an abrupt change of position, 'that you had had the quieting of her during the last few weeks. Why, look'ee here, she went off yesterday in howls and kicks, only because this Podster blurted out, that you had taken up with some girl down at that Cornish doghole on the shin-

gles. It's only fair you ought to bring her to, when your inconstancies set her off.'

'She loves me still,' murmured Baker. 'She will forgive her own Vincent in no time. What is any Stalker to me? Allow me to fly upwards on the wings of reconciliation.'

'Easy does it,' interposed Noyes, detaining him by the sleeve; 'but one thing I must stipulate first. The girl, no doubt, will forgive you. She's silly and feather-headed, and you're her lover, and that's enough. If you had meanwhile taken to housebreaking, I suppose she'd make it up with you. Well, well, such are girls—born to waste wise men's time and turn fools' heads. Then I've been vexed to see her mope so much, though I didn't think you worth much moping over. However, she did, and she's my daughter. My conclusion being, that if you and she want to get married, I am heartily sick of both of you, and the sooner the thing is settled the better it will please me.'

‘My preserver, my future father,’ ejaculated Vincent, ‘every moment you detain me from Selina’s feet falls upon my soul like a drop of scalding iron. Mrs Lobbs is now ascending the staircase; I hear her. I envy Lobbs the privilege of treading the blessed steps, which lead to Selina’s celestial presence. O fortunate Lobbs, you may ascend; I consume below among legal documents.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Baker; I have just done,’ pursued Noyes.

‘Ha,’ cried Baker with a start, ‘she’s tuning up at her cottage piano. The envious rafters cannot stifle wholly the soft percolating murmur of the keys. I wish I were a rafter. Perhaps she is telling her canary bird, that she is deserted, and I am perjured. Ought that bird to be allowed to remain under an erroneous impression? Detain me no longer, I entreat—I adjure you.’

‘Then, off with you,’ laughed Noyes, ‘and get your preliminary nonsense over in

reasonable time. When that's done, and you are each of you able to discourse rationally, come down and fetch me up; for I must talk seriously to you both.'

Baker rushed tumultuously from the apartment, and the piano stopped suddenly overhead. A knock at the office-door. Enter Lobbs with a letter. 'The messenger was awaiting,' she said.

'Stephen Gow's hand,' mused Noyes as he broke the seal; 'I can guess what this means. Yes, sure enough, the plot thickens. "Mr Miles Sudgrove expired at 4 o'clock, having never rallied. At what time can you join me there to-night? We have lost an esteemed—" yes, yes, and so on. Mrs Lobbs,—ah, you're there. Compliments to Mr Gow, and I'll meet him at Russell Square at 9 P.M. to-night.'

Mrs Lobbs vanishes, and Noyes does not get again to his writing, but turns some mental problem over and over; while the wrinkles about his eyes deepen. So goes about half an hour, when Vincent

Baker again reports himself below ; Noyes gives his head a brisk shake, as if to dissipate a cloud of teasing thoughts on the wing about it ; and, this done, accompanies Vincent up-stairs, where he finds Selina radiant on an ottoman.

‘Well,’ said Noyes, kissing his daughter, ‘your faces tell me you two have made it up?’

‘Oh yes, dearest papa,’ exclaimed Selina, ‘Vincent has explained everything nobly. He only used to sit on the shingles with that odious Miss Stalker to talk to her about me.’

‘Indeed, my dear!’

‘And he assures me she is a positive fright, and I’m certain it is very mischievous of Mr Podster to set such things about. And, as for Australia, my poor boy’s foot was actually on the deck and the letter gone; when he says he had not the heart to leave the land which held his jewel; which was very pretty and affectionate, and shows how warmly he must have been

attached; so they put him out with his portmanteau in a little boat at Gravesend; and they went on and emigrated without him, which I am very thankful for; as he would now be standing upside down and other dreadful things,' ran on Selina, pretty enough in her flutter of breathless agitation and joy at Vincent's appearance.

'And how soon do you mean to have another quarrel?' demanded Noyes, grimly humorous and kindly sarcastic.

'Never, till the orange wreath encircles the brow of my adored one,' repeated Vincent earnestly.

'Never till then, my gentle Vincent,' echoed Selina.

'You are right enough,' proceeded Noyes with a furtive smile, 'not to take out a longer lease of quietude. Yes, you'll quarrel soon after the ceremony.'

'You perverse and wicked papa,' cried Selina, 'to pretend to misunderstand us. Oh no, we shall never dispute again, unless which is to give up most to the other.'



We shall have no thought but to study each other in everything. And we are to have a tiny cottage quite by itself on Hampstead Heath; with a watch-dog and a place behind for a cow, whom I shall milk myself every afternoon at five—'

'My dear Selina, how you do run on,' interposed Noyes; 'I must have some definite talk with each of you. Never mind the ground-plan of your ornamental cottage now—'

'Afternoon at five,' she resumed breathless, 'and we'll plant a Virginian creeper on one side the door, and a honeysuckle on the other; and they shall twine together above it; emblematical, you see; Vincent being the creeper and I the woodbine. And then we must have a boot-scraper, I suppose, but it shall be painted blue; and, if we could persuade a nightingale to build under one of our windows, the thing would be quite complete; and they do tell me those birds are so fond of nursery-grounds. And we will never have

any coarse great butcher's joints, but sweet-breads and other cheap little things; so we shall live so economically, you can't think—'

'My dear child,' insisted Noyes, 'arrange all this nonsense with Vincent presently. I have a client who requires my presence; let us get to something definite before I leave, then relapse into melodrama till you're tired.'

'I've just finished, papa dear,' she panted, going off again at score like a swallow with a dip, 'only Vincent must learn the flute, and I'll accompany him, and we'll have Devonshire cream twice a week all the year through; and I'll mend all Vincent's shirts, and I'll make him grow a moustache, and it will be such fun.'

'When?' exclaimed Noyes, abruptly, to startle her into attention.

'Yes, when, my angel?' demanded Vincent, seconding his father-in-law elect.

'Oh, any day,' giggled Selina, with a growing blush, 'you must fix that, papa.'

‘Must I then?’ returned the attorney, with a pleasant change of manner, ‘then I will. Look’ee here, I’m heartily tired of both of you, to begin with.’

‘Have I teased you then so very much?’ pouted Selina, coaxing him.

‘You’ll have another tiff if we delay long, to continue with,’ pursued Noyes.

‘You naughty, sarcastical, unromantic old creature!’ said Selina, pinching his ear.

‘You won’t know your own minds any better, if we wait a week of Sundays, to put in as an appendix to the last reflection,’ went on Noyes.

‘Better, sir,’ smiled his daughter, arranging his shirt-frill; ‘the last remark shall pass. You are improving, sir.’

‘And I say next Thursday, to conclude with,’ said Noyes, with a thump on the table, ‘and get it over, for goodness’ sake; for, till then, I shall have no peace, as I clearly foresee.’

Even Vincent stared a little at hearing

so early a day named, but he merely murmured, with great presence of mind, in her ear, 'Let it be Thursday, my ineffable one, as the author of your being has suggested.'

'Why, goodness me,' cried Selina, with a scared look, 'think of the dresses, and the bridesmaids.'

'You are bewitching in anything,' insinuated Vincent. 'It would be a great expense getting up any of your late school-fellows by rail. Let's save the money for an autumn trip.'

'Still a girl likes to be turned off respectably,' maintained Selina, with a little mocking face.

'Come, come, girl,' persuaded Noyes, 'I'm not rich, and Vincent is quite the other way. I can't afford to make a silly splash, which will only do good to dress-makers and pastry-cooks. Vincent shall buy the license to-morrow, and give notice at the church. We three can hire a glass coach on Thursday morning, and get it

over quietly. Vincent can ask his mother to the church if he likes. Then you two can go down to Brighton for a week that afternoon.'

'Why delay, my dearest girl,' entreated Vincent, 'to accede to the Arcadian programme of ecstatic felicity sketched for us by your respected sire?'

'Then I must send off Lobbs this very minute about a bonnet,' said Selina in agitation.

'Then you agree, like a sensible girl?' asked the father.

'Then you relent, like an angel of fascination?' added the lover.

'Yes, I suppose so,' laughed Selina. 'You seem to be both in one boat against me. What can a poor girl say? Fathers, in books, generally sustain a maiden's timid reluctance. You've deserted me; I'm ashamed of you, pa. I don't believe I shall have a bonnet to my name by Thursday fit to travel in.'

‘What are bonnets to bliss?’ demanded Vincent epigrammatically.

‘Then that’s done with. Now I’m off,’ said Noyes hurriedly, ‘and I look to you to keep her up to the mark, Vincent.’

‘Whisper, papa, before you go,’ said Selina, on tiptoe to reach his ear. ‘May I ask Vincent about this property, you told me he might come in for?’

Noyes’s face became overcast with frowns.

‘Certainly not,’ he replied between his teeth; ‘you will spoil everything—I mean it was all a mistake of mine—another Baker, you understand. You will fret the poor fellow to death with false hopes if you do.’

‘Oh, then I’ll be so very, very discreet,’ she pleaded penitently.

‘What is this mystery, father-in-law elect?’ said Baker.

‘Shall I tell him, Selina?’ said Noyes, nudging her.

‘As you please, papa—if you must, papa.’

‘It will make her blush, I give you warning, Baker,’ hesitated Noyes.

‘Reason the more; I shall think it is sunrise,’ said Vincent with a poetical effort.

‘Listen, Vincent; it really is too bad, but—but—she feared you might forget to buy the ring!’

‘O papa, how can you tell—’ broke out Selina.

‘Whether he was going to buy it, my dear?’ said Noyes, catching her up. ‘Well, forewarned, forearmed; he won’t forget it now.’





## CHAPTER VII.

### KNOBLAUCH AT BAY.

**T**HE receipt of Samson's letter, or rather of Samson's handwriting and Mrs Rainbird's words, brought Brian naturally post haste to Memoria Lodge. He was annoyed to find the house shut up, and the trusty Kedge alone in possession.

'Missis took the two young ladies off to Kent this 'ere morning. She took the start into her head sudden-like to go. She's the one for energy, is missis, spite of all her ailings. She made Dr Gloizer order her down for her health. Lord bless you,



he'd order her anything she told him, from a tooth-pick to a red herring. She'd turn him off if he didn't. When her mind is bent to anything, she do carry it through uncommon. She had every box covered and corded up in lesser nor no time. How she hustled about them girls it was beautiful to witness. She made master go alonger them, she did ; as she said there wos murdering thieves about, that would steal anything, from a wife to a handkerchief—'

Brian coughed and coloured at this somewhat embarrassing allusion.

'Being her very words in this very wilderness of a garden ; for grow it cannot, except a stump of cabbage which will not get beyond a certain point of stumpiness ; and not be expected it should produce flower-show prizes, with them a-laying down their monuments in all directions. Her very words they were, as she was setting her foot upon the cab-step ; and Miss Loo's canary's cage got jammed

in a perpendicular manner atween the door and Missis's bonnet, which made her plunge fearful after. "You keep all locked and barred, Kedge," says she; "I shouldn't be surprised if thieves was to come and ast." But master he comes back in the morning alone, for mortality and tombstones wait for nobody.'

'Have you their address down in Kent,' asked Brian, much crestfallen at Kedge's remarks.

Kedge could not repeat it with any accuracy, but, she 'minded,' there might be a Canterbury in it or a Sittingbourne. Couldn't undertake to say which. Was nearly sure of one of them.

'But, my good woman,' cried Brian, 'this is hopeless. A letter would never reach Helen thus addressed.'

'It's much if master won't be able to tell you, when he returns to-morrow,' hazarded Kedge hopefully.

'Lord bless the woman,' muttered Brian, 'of course he will. A man doesn't

forget clean where he has put his wife and family. But, meantime, the delay of a few hours may put me quite wrong with them—'

'Then wrong they must be put,' replied Kedge, in a fatalistic and dogged manner. 'You won't have to put Missis far; she seemed a long way towards being wrong at starting.'

'Yes, yes, that's the wretched part of it. How did Miss Helen look?'

'Worried,' said Kedge laconically.

'Poor child, poor child,' he murmured. 'Then there's nothing for it, except returning to-morrow and trying to catch your master. Good-day, Kedge.'

As Brian strolled leisurely away, very much dejected, he came upon an old gentleman addressing the baker of the district, who was delivering out loaves lower down the line of isolated houses. 'A comical-looking old customer,' mused Brian, 'what can he want of the baker?'

Just as he passed the pair he heard the

old gentleman say in rather a testy manner, 'Yes, Memoria Lodge, I can't say it no plainer.'

'But a deal civiler, you might, guv'ner,' remonstrated the baker, scraping a loaf with his palm, and then dusting it.

Brian instantly slackened his pace.

'How do they name that well set-up, fine make of a woman there?—servant, I suppose?'

'Kedge,' suggested the baker.

'I know better,' fumed the elderly personage. 'Stay, do they keep more than one imposing-looking servant?'

'Find out for yourself,' growled the baker, and trundled on his cart next door.

The questioner hobbled off in a manner suggestive of a gouty subject.

Brian wheeled round. Should he warn Kedge? He retraced his steps, and rang again.

'I have just heard, Kedge,' he began, 'that odd-looking, elderly person questioning the baker about your name, whom

we once before noticed from the window.'

Kedge exploded in laughter.

'Oh, he don't mean any harm,' she said, stuffing her apron into her mouth; 'I've seen him dodging about before.'

So Brian returned to his temporary attic, reassured in this respect, but very fidgety about the Gow affair. Returning, he found a letter on his table, with deep black border. He did not recognize the hand. He opened it with more than usual trepidation, fearing a further and more complicated aspect of the Gow misunderstanding, and reads as follows :

'SIR,—I have to inform you, at the request of Mrs Pipechick, that my late client, Mr Miles Sudgrove, died this evening, after a short illness. Mrs Pipechick desires me to say that, at this melancholy season, she is ready to forego recent animosities and present scandals, so far as to consent to your joining the funeral on Wednesday next at

11, at Kensal-green Cemetery, on condition you do not attempt to hold any verbal communication with her; and that you will leave the ground immediately the mournful ceremony is concluded. I need hardly remind you, as my late client's man of business, that you take no benefit under his will.

‘ I remain, sir,

‘ Yours faithfully,

‘ GILBERT NOYES.

‘ Fish-street Hill, E. C.’

Let us now return to Brimeswiggie, whom, doubtless, our readers have recognized. Repulsed by the baker, that worthy compound of surliness and joviality limped slowly southwards towards the more central districts of the town. Presently, an omnibus passed him, and he saw a person on its roof making violent signs to him with an umbrella. On his responding, no less heartily, the outside passenger crawled over the intervening legs, and descended

behind. On regaining *terra firma*, he came straight for Brimeswiggles, and patted him lustily on the shoulder.

‘The very man I wanted to see!’ shouted Vincent Baker, for he it was.

‘Why, have you, too, deserted the balmy west?’ cried Brimeswiggles, wringing his fingers nearly off. ‘Why, what wind blows you here? How did you leave the Stalkers? Will Clara weep buckets? Hey?’

‘My dear fellow,’ entreated Vincent, lowering his voice, ‘not another word on that subject, if you love me.’

‘Serious, by Jove!’ demanded the bristle-dealer.

‘Why, the fact is,’ stammered Baker, ‘not to put too fine a point upon it, I am, I may say, about to contract—in fact—to marry, another young party.’

‘Hah, hah,’ roared Brimeswiggles, ‘volatile, my dear Baker, volatile. Quite the old song. Loves and he rides away.’

Capital! Gad, it's the best thing I ever heard.'

'Only think,' went on Baker, taking him by the button, 'what must Podster do but mention Clara to the—other party. The other party cut up, I may say, roughish.'

'Podster in town! Why, Cornwall has migrated East,' said Brimeswiggles.

'I say, old fellow,' pursued Baker, 'I'm going to be tied up on Thursday. Come and be my best man.'

'The dickens you are?' rejoined the other; 'you don't let the grass grow under your feet, speaking matrimonially. I shall expect twins about that day week. I'd better be looking out two second-hand silver mugs. I'll stand for both, my boy; and come and give you a knee on the trying occasion of Thursday. My eyes, what a facer for Clara!'

'It's the wish of the parent of the young party concerned,' simpered Baker,



‘that we should get it over. A legal party is the parent of the young party; a influential party—very.’

‘Then you’re in for a niceish thing, my boy,’ added Brimeswiggles. ‘I give you joy. I wish you joy.’

‘I’m going to see my mother now,’ continued Vincent, ‘let’s keep together in that direction. You’ll find a knife and fork always at my cottage when I’m settled.’

Pending the arrival of Baker at the Knoblauches, let us take the liberty of outstripping him, for Brimeswiggles can progress but slowly, and see how that excellent couple are occupied.

Enter Knoblauch from his dressing-room much disturbed, but dressed to a wrinkle. His whiskers are beautifully oiled, and a single camellia adorns his button-hole. Still beneath that mould of manly grace lurks insidious woe. He holds a letter daintily between the finger and thumb of his white jewelled hand. The other fingers are twisted back, lest the

letter's touch should sully their scented-soap surface.

‘My dear Melicent, Melly, I mean, I am crushed, annihilated. Intrusive associations of a time, when I could not keep myself as select as I was formed by nature to be, refuse to be stifled. If the pushing writer of this unlettered scrawl, whom I momentarily expect, manages to overpower Gloomer in the sub-hall, contrives to force his plebeian presence upon us, Melly, I say deliberately, we are lost. I shall totter from the pedestal which I have gained, thanks to easy circumstances and my winning charm. Society will refuse to know anything about us. She will close her doors upon us, and never more return our cards. O Melly, this is very terrible.’

‘Drat the man,’ exclaimed his wife unceremoniously, ‘what’s he so afraid of? Who is going to take us by storm this morning?’

Knoblauch sank on the sofa, and buried his face between his hands.

‘Crippy,’ he moaned and murmured with a dry gulp. ‘Crippy is coming.’

‘So he *has* found you out at last,’ she said carelessly, with an unfeeling laugh. ‘Well, let him come. Crippy won’t eat us.’

‘But, my love, the horrible ungentleness of the man,’ he wildly remonstrated; ‘I don’t believe he has any gloves; I am shocked to think, that even Gloomer should hear him ask for me. The whole man reeks of an atmosphere of billiards and bar-rooms. If Gloomer yields an inch, he leaves me this day month without a character.’

‘Come, come,’ said she in mischief, ‘you liked Crippy well enough at one time; and we may again, for all we know. My uncle may drop off, and then our old life begins over again.’

‘Melly,’ he resumed, ‘I will not be preyed upon by vultures. This low fellow is a vulture. I have even known him subsist for weeks together by petty pilferings at the card-table. He is notoriously in-

solvent, and on all accounts a most undesirable acquaintance. I prefer not even to think about him. A low cur, my dear Melly, a very abject hound.'

Enter Gloomer with a dirty visiting card curled up at the edges. Mr Knoblauch started, and clasped his hand wildly upon his forehead.

'The person below sends his card,' spoke Gloomer, 'and, since master is out, will step up and see missis.'

'You hound,' roared Knoblauch, seizing him by the collar, 'this is your work, he has bribed you. There is no exit. The demon has cut me off. I shall meet him on the stairs. Unless you get him out instantly, Gloomer, you quit my service.'

Gloomer, released, shook himself, and looked considerably petrified.

'Say, I'm unwell, and cannot see him,' commanded Mrs Knoblauch, retaining her presence of mind in the panic of her husband.

‘Don’t take your eye off him again till he has gone,’ shouted Knoblauch after the retreating Gloomer.

‘Harvey, I’m surprised at you. Before the servants too. What must Gloomer think?’ remonstrated his calmer spouse.

‘Listen, my dear,’ he entreated, ‘I want to hear the door slam. Will he never go? Now they’re talking together. Good Lord, I hear steps again upon the stairs; he’s bringing the fellow up, he has betrayed me in revenge for my collaring him. Oh, hide me, Melicent, hide me.’

And Mr Knoblauch, camellia, hair-oil, and all, to his wife’s astonishment, proceeded to crawl underneath the sofa.

Re-enter Gloomer alone, merely to announce that the person of the name of Crippy would call again next week.

‘Master here?’ inquired Gloomer, rubbing his eyes, and searching the apartment with them widely opened in all directions.

‘Never mind your master,’ she replied, coolly. ‘That will do. Leave the room.’

Gloomer went, casting back a last Parthian glance of astonishment.

‘Now, you precious donkey,’ she scolded, in a grating voice, ‘perhaps you’ll condescend to crawl out again.’

Mr Knoblauch’s whiskered head began to protrude under the hangings, like the witch caldron scene in ‘Macbeth.’

‘Is that demon really gone?’ he whispered.

‘Bother the man!’ she cried; ‘come out quick, or stay there. Here’s Gloomer coming up again.’

Knoblauch emerged, with the curls and whisker on one side of his head completely flattened.

Gloomer again, who, seeing his master, now starts violently back.

‘Confound you, what are you starting at?’ demands Knoblauch, sternly.

‘I thought you was here, and then I thought you wasn’t, and now I think you are, sir,’ explained Gloomer, much confused.

‘You have been drinking,’ said Knoblauch, promptly. ‘Who is that card for?’

‘Missis, this time.’

‘Then give it her. Don’t stand staring there.’

Mrs Knoblauch read — ‘Mr Vincent Baker.’ It was now her turn to feel a little uneasy.

‘Let him wait in the hall,’ she said, hurriedly. ‘It’s the man with my new wreath, on approval, Harvey dear. I think you had better go and take a walk now.’

So Harvey went, and swaggered out past a young man, who sat awaiting Mrs Knoblauch’s convenience below.





## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE READING OF THE WILL.

**E**VENTS begin to press thickly upon us in this history of the Sudgrove family. On Wednesday the remains of Miles Sudgrove were deposited in Kensal-green Cemetery, with all the pride and circumstance that befitted his station. The next morning, being Thursday, witnessed another kind of ceremony. Vincent Baker led the blushing Selina Noyes to the altar of a quiet city church. Noyes gave his daughter away. Brimeswiggles attended as Vincent's backer. Mrs Knoblauch dropped into a pew during



the service, and witnessed the ceremony unofficially, through dread of the redoubtable Knoblauch ; she being convinced, after thinking it over, that the nephew hypothesis, as applied to Vincent, was not tenable as yet, till she could introduce him to her husband in some way not calculated to arouse his suspicious temperament. Altogether, there had never been a quieter wedding ; and though Selina pouted not a little at the lamentable want of *éclat* with which it was attended, yet she looked pretty enough, and perfectly contented with her fate in other respects. Neither is it greatly to be wondered that she refused Mr Brimeswiggles point blank the salute, which he rather officiously claimed as Vincent's coadjutor ; or that she should have exploded with laughter, immediately afterwards, at Mr Brimeswiggles rueful and disappointed countenance. Mrs Knoblauch came a moment into the vestry to shake hands with Noyes, and to kiss each of the newly-united ones ; Noyes taking her

aside to whisper, 'Remember Russell Square at 2 P.M. to-day, and don't be late.' Then she departed alone, to get home as she could, and to nerve herself as best she might for this portentous appointment at the late Miles Sudgrove's mansion ; while the victims to Hymen and their two abettors adjourned to Fish-street Hill, where a small collation, prepared under the auspices of Mrs Lobbs, awaited them. Rather before half-past one Noyes had got Selina and Vincent comfortably packed off *en route* for Brighton, where they intended to honeymoon ; and then the indefatigable attorney gave his hair a rapid brush, and his face a hasty lather, and then, springing into a cab, speeded away for Russell Square.

For, be it known, the will of Miles Sudgrove was about to be officially read, and Noyes intended, at the conclusion of the reading, to offer a few remarks of his own.

It was indeed an imposing sight. Gol-

land had put the dinner-of-twenty leaves into the mahogany table in the dining-room, had covered the whole with green baize, made a raid upon all the inkstands in the house, and spread little oases of blotting paper with a tasteful hand. In fact, there was a business-like flavour about the whole room, which would have done credit even to a magistrates' meeting. Stephen Gow, as senior executor, presided, that is to say, his arm-chair was the most voluminous, he had most blotting paper before him, and his inkstand was a Goliath to the rest. Moreover, he could show six quill pens to every two possessed by his neighbours. Next to him sat Gilbert Noyes, his co-executor, beyond whom Podster. Now, on the other side, there came Georgina Pipechick, a perfect fountain of crape; Dovey Snewing supporting her, the picture of gentlemanly best-class-of-mute sorrow. Ending in Aurelia Van, she having exhumed with difficulty, from some worm-eaten recess, the habiliments in which she

must have followed her late parental bachelor of divinity to the tombs, among the small years of the present century.

All being assembled, Noyes retired to the study to return with a sealed despatch box, which he laid upon the table with an emphatic bang. Gow then cleared his throat, and proceeded.

‘We have a task of unusual delicacy before us this afternoon. Various conflicting interests will be found to be represented here before the termination of these proceedings. I can only entreat of the present company the largest amount of mutual forbearance compatible with freedom in expressing their sentiments.’

Mrs Pipechick murmured, that she was there in a most delicate position, as the person taking most largely under the will; and she did hope every one would respect her recent bereavement, and not say anything ill-natured about by-gones; she, for her part, being perfectly ready to forgive every one.

Aurelia Van concurred in a twitter, that dearest Georgina's behaviour was beautiful, and that being, for some time past, convinced that she, Georgina, was an angel, she had always expected as much of her. Aurelia then took a peppermint drop out of her reticule, and smiled blandly on the assembled company during its deglutition.

‘One moment, before we commence,’ said Noyes, with the utmost suavity. ‘This being a business meeting, we are obliged to take nothing for granted. I am sure, therefore, Mr Snewing will excuse me, if I venture to ask in what capacity he is here to-day?’

‘There, I knew some one was going to be ill-natured,’ sighed Mrs Pipechick, crimsoning up.

‘Indeed,’ said Snewing, eyeing Noyes with no very benevolent expression, ‘I concede Mr Noyes’ right to ask the question; any opinion on his good taste in pressing it I reserve. I am here as the future hus-

band of Georgina Pipechick, and mean to watch over her interests to the utmost.'

'And a sweet couple they will make,' gurgled Aurelia, bolting the stump of her lozenge in a sudden gush of amiability to her surface. 'A sweet, heavenly couple, and one to notice in the streets, even not knowing them beforehand. Bless you! bless you!'

'What is she here for?' continued Snewing roughly, indicating Aurelia, and not the least grateful for her recent laudation.

'She is a legatee to the amount of twenty pounds,' replied Gow; 'I presume, the rest of us need not explain our presence. Now for the will. "This is the last will and testament of Miles Sudgrove," &c.,' proceeded he. Divested of much legal verbiage, which we will spare the reader, the effect of Sudgrove's will came to this, as we already know. Mrs Pipechick got Orpwood and everything else, whether in money, land, cash, or furniture,

for her life. Then her son Alfred took the lands in tail, the personalty absolutely. Not even Brian's name was mentioned. Noyes, Golland, and Aurelia Van received trifling legacies.

A dead silence followed its perusal.

'I ought perhaps to notice,' said Gow, 'that a member of this family, who is passed over in the document we have just heard, was offered an opportunity of attending here to-day, but declined.'

'She deserves it all,' chorused Aurelia, applying a handkerchief to the corner of her left eye. 'She is rich and a landed proprietress, but it all comes by merit. I'll trouble the united kingdom, including Wales, to produce such a devoted daughter. The united kingdom would be put to it. What would I give for such a child myself, which, being unmarried, is not likely to happen to me? She tended him that is gone, and, I'm thankful to say, it has answered.'

'Without wishing to check the play

of amiable feelings in the elderly lady in bugles,' interposed Podster, 'I venture to suggest, that emotions occupy time, and ain't strickly business.'

'Make her hold her tongue, Georgina,' growled Snewing, seconding Podster.

'So far for Mr Miles Sudgrove's will. My co-executor, Mr Noyes, has now a statement to make, which will materially change the effect of that document,' Gōw went on to say, and then motioned Noyes with a pen to proceed. Snewing turned pale, and then made a clutch at the green baize table-cloth. Noyes watched him, intensely delighted.

'What does he mean?' whispered Mrs Pipechick, grasping Snewing's arm with her bony jewelled fingers.

'Listen, can't you leave me alone?' snarled Snewing to his intended. 'Either your father has died insolvent, or this is some trick of that rascal Noyes. Look how maliciously he is watching us. Keep a bold face, Georgina, or you'll betray



yourself. Jove, it's lucky the old boy went, before I was actually tied up to this woman,' he added to himself.

'My statement is merely this,' observed Noyes, keeping a steady gaze on the Pipechick faction. 'Mr Miles Sudgrove, some months before his death, discovered a will executed by his late brother. Now, the bulk of Mr Miles Sudgrove's property came through that brother's supposed intestacy. Consequently, assuming this older will as valid, which my co-executor, Mr Podster, and myself see no reason to doubt, the property which Mr Miles Sudgrove had any right to make a will about is very trifling.'

'I'm afraid we're done, Georgina,' gasped Snewing, 'unless that rascal can have forged this. He is capable of it.'

'O Dovey, this is awful,' sighed Mrs Pipechick in his ear; 'but you have enough for both, dear: you told me so.'

'We'll see about that,' muttered Dovey dubiously.

‘How beautifully that dear Mr Noyes does speak,’ interposed Aurelia, with true sycophantic worship of the party uppermost. ‘I do wonder,’ she said, turning a cold stare on Georgina Pipechick, ‘at people being so rapacious after money, that they behave like bedlams, when they hear it isn’t theirs to get. For the credit of your sex be more composed. I wonder at you, Mrs Pipechick!’

‘Do even you turn from me, Aurelia?’ asked Mrs Pipechick, with suppressed sobs, and not a trace of her old spirit left.

‘While Mr Miles Sudgrove,’ resumed Noyes, ‘was debating how to test the validity of his brother’s will, he dies. He had consulted me on this point, and Mr Podster.’

That gentleman nodded.

‘I shall hand round a copy now of Mr Turner Sudgrove’s will. The original is in that box.’

The document passed round amid a buzz of excitement.

‘Scandalous!’ shrieked Georgina Pipechick.

‘Infamous!’ reiterated Miss Van.

‘This is a forgery,’ insisted Snewing, pale with anger to his very lips.

Noyes gloated a moment over the discomfiture of this worthy trio, and then proceeded jauntily,—

‘You see, I’m the last man to rake up a family scandal, but there’s no help for it. If Miss Van, in what I’m about to say, anticipates any shock to her maiden delicacy, she can withdraw. It all comes to this: Mr Turner Sudgrove was, till the end of his days, extremely infatuated about a certain Melusina, or, as she is called elsewhere, “Melly” Baker, who lived with him.’

‘The wretch!’ said Miss Van, with a cough of protest.

‘When he found himself dying, this Mrs Baker was evidently near her confinement. What does he do? Having never been on friendly terms with his brother, he

leaves the whole of his large property to this unborn child on its attaining the age of 21, only deducting a large annuity for the mother during her life. This, I may remark, Mr Miles Sudgrove has paid, like a man of honour, since the first day this will of his brother's came to light. The quarterly receipts of Mrs Baker are in my possession.'

'Such women ought to be drawn and quartered, instead of drawing their quarters,' threw in Aurelia, with some tautology.

'Can the child be produced?' asked Snewing.

'He can,' said the attorney.

'Where is this Mrs Baker?' went on Snewing.

'Down-stairs,' replied Noyes simply.

'Let Mrs Baker be summoned,' suggested Gow.

'Oh, gracious,' said Aurelia, gathering her skirts in, to avoid contagion. 'To

think, that I should be forced to remain in the room with such a creature.'

'Then go and be hung to you!' muttered Snewing, whose temper the present aspect of affairs had not improved.

'Sir,' retorted Miss Van, with dignity, 'the daughter of a doctor of divinity is not to be sworn out of a room.'

'Then stay, and confound you!' repeated Snewing.

'Oaths shall never drive me from any apartment in the united kingdom,' she panted, eagerly curious, 'not excepting Wales.'

'One remark,' said Podster in a cheerful voice; 'Mrs Baker is now ascending the stairs, and will be shortly before the present amiable company. Let us, specially the ladies, keep off personal allusions in addressing her; or we shall have a battle royal in no time, and so forfeit all hope of progressing with the inquiry in hand.'

'I fully concur in Mr Podster's senti-

ments,' assented Gow, with a wave of his pen. 'Mrs Baker, you can come in.'

'Do my eyes deceive me?' cried Aurelia. 'Is my vision becoming oblique from the insults I have undergone at this mortal table? Can—can this be Melly Knoblauch, that I have associated with as so genteel? O wicked world, O deluded but virtuous Aurelia!'

A hard dogged look was creeping over Mrs Knoblauch's face. The air of a woman, who had a considerable ordeal before her, and was prepared to brazen it through, as long as her face-coating of that serviceable metal would hold out.

'Well, Aurelia, well!' retorted Mrs Knoblauch, examining the spinster leisurely, 'genteel or not, many is the chop that you have had at our table, to keep the life in your old bones. You have been too hungry scores of times to toss your whitey-brown front at our morality.'

'I shall stifle,' exclaimed Aurelia, 'if

this woman remains in the apartment.' Then, turning to the company, she continued, 'She kept a servant out of livery, she lived in a West-end street, the clergyman of the parish himself might have called. I am not prepared to say he didn't.'

'Ladies, ladies,' struck in Podster, 'if you could postpone these little amenities. Get on, Noyes, while you can,' he whispered. 'Both the fair belligerents are a little blown at present.'

'What account does this person give of herself?' inquired Snewing.

'Can you ask, Dovey? Only look at her,' sneered Mrs Pipechick.

'I must beg, Georgina—' he insisted.

'Come, I'll tell you in a few words,' interrupted Noyes. 'This was Melly or Melusina Baker, and she has now changed her name by marriage to Knoblauch. Her husband was in the wine-trade, and is now a gentleman at large. Her son, I mean

*the* son mentioned in here (patting the will-copy with the back of his unoccupied hand), is now grown up, of whom more presently. Is that correct, Mrs Knoblauch ?’

‘Quite exact, Mr Noyes,’ she returned. ‘I am sure it goes against me very much to assent to this in public.’

‘You can prove this boy is your own, I presume ?’ inquired Snewing.

‘I have always kept his baptismal certificate,’ she rejoined.

‘Then all I have to say is, that this will of Mr Turner Sudgrove’s,’ said Snewing, ‘must be tested by the proper tribunal. On behalf of Mrs Pipechick I here solemnly dispute its validity.’

‘You naturally would,’ spoke Noyes contemptuously ; ‘I expected nothing less of you. You have been singularly ready, sir, to talk about forgery. Let the proper courts decide this.’

Aurelia Van here became excited.

‘I must speak,’ she protested.



‘I wish you would smother her, Georgina,’ snarled Snewing.

‘I won’t be coughed down. What does this creature say her name is?’ she vociferated.

‘My good soul,’ said Gow, ‘if you would only attend a little, and make less noise—’

‘I will have her name,’ insisted Aurelia in her highest treble.

‘For the sake of quietness, Miss Van,’ pursued Noyes, blandly, ‘let me repeat to you, what we have all learnt, half an hour since; this was Melusina Baker, and is Melusina Knoblauch.’

‘O my poor Georgina,’ shrilled Aurelia, ‘I see it all now; this is a wicked plot between Noyes and that woman to ruin you.’

Mrs Knoblauch changed colour. Noyes became purple with impatience.

‘Look at her,’ went on Miss Van, ‘how she flinches! Answer me this, you bad and

artful thing. Why are you always forbidding your husband to call you Melicent? She's an impostor; I'm ready to swear it. Her name is Melicent Baker, and no more Melusina than I am.'

And Miss Van fell shrieking back in violent hysterics. Strange to say, when the attention of the company was a little diverted from attending to her paroxysms, the individual, whom she had accused of not being Melusina, was found to have disappeared.

A dead silence succeeded this discovery. Snewing's eyes began to glitter with malicious triumph; he broke the pause by saying,

'Well, Mr Noyes, so clever a practitioner ought to have chosen his accomplices better.'

Noyes seemed petrified, confounded; he began fumbling in the breast pocket of his coat.

'Here are her quarterly receipts,' he

stammered, producing them. 'See, she signs Melusina Knoblauch. I have been deceived as much as any of you.'

'Highly probable, my good sir; highly probable,' sneered Snewing. 'What is your opinion, Mr Gow?'

'I cannot deny,' said Gow, 'that circumstances have an ugly look at present against you, Mr Noyes.'

'Why bless me,' protested Noyes, perfectly stiff with indignation, 'I can prove I was taken in. Why, my daughter—but never mind that now. Why, the woman replied correctly to every question I asked her, came in answer to an advertisement, described Turner Sudgrove accurately; also the suburban villa which he lived in; was indicated to me years back as this Melusina Baker by a person, now dead, who could have had no interest in the deception; she seems, moreover, certainly the mother of a boy, whom I have had my eye on for years—I own, I am completely bewildered.'

‘I never saw a better piece of acting in my life,’ observed Snewing, with a harsh taunting laugh.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ said Podster, the solver of difficulties, rising and thumping on the table, ‘if you’ll allow me a moment, and won’t all speak at once, I think I can clear this up.’

They all crowded round him breathless; even Noyes looked at him with that expression of helpless confidence, with which he had inspired the late Mr Sudgrove.

‘Now you’re quiet, are you?’ went on Podster, ‘and attentive? Noyes has told you, that this female, if not Melusina Baker, knew at least all about her. You think Noyes lies. I don’t. The riddle is easy. Noyes has merely got hold of Melusina Baker’s *sister*. There were clearly two girls, and we’ve got the wrong one. She has naturally encouraged the error, when she found money was to be made by it; or

that her son was likely to benefit by the confusion.'

'Podster,' cried Noyes, 'is invaluable. He sets us all right. I have been a double-dyed fool. I remember now this girl had a sister. I shall give you no more trouble, Mrs Pipechick. If this woman's sister be dead, as is probably the case, or she would never have had the audacity to personate her; and, if her child is dead, as it probably is for the same reason; the property was indisputably Mr Miles Sudgrove's to devise, and yours to get. Mrs Pipechick, I can only say, I regret this error. You cannot guess how much I shall suffer by it myself.'

'Mr Noyes,' answered Snewing, radiant with triumph, 'considering your grievous discomfiture you carry off this well, and explain it plausibly. Remain, however, assured, that every circumstance of this personation shall be investigated; as well as the authenticity of this supposed will

tested. I hope you will be able to come out with clean hands. I say, I hope so.'

So Mrs Pipechick embraced the still hysterical Aurelia and called her her preserver. And the rest of the company broke up in the most admired confusion.





## CHAPTER IX.

### ON THE BEACH AND ON THE PAVEMENT.

**V**INCENT was strolling on the beach the day after his marriage, and Selina was sitting behind a bathing machine at a short distance, when he was galvanized by the apparition of Mrs Knoblauch.

‘Mother!’ he exclaimed, ‘this is a surprise; Selina will be delighted.’

‘Don’t go back to her,’ she answered, hurriedly: ‘sit down and talk for five minutes. We have cut and run for it again.’

‘Like Penshingle,’ he hazarded, not greatly surprised.

‘Much the same,’ she smiled. ‘Knoblauch remains to pack up. They can’t touch him in this business. I should be locked up, so I came off at once. He joins me at Dover, and we cross to-morrow. I don’t know when we shall come back.’

‘Indeed, mother, I regret this,’ he murmured, ‘but I knew you were carrying on too fast in London. Why, the style of your apartments alone—’

‘Listen,’ she continued, ‘old Noyes has taken me all along for my sister. He received you into his office thinking you my sister’s child. I really did not know this when he first gave me the money; but it came upon me afterwards, and the money was so much, and so grateful, I couldn’t do without it, so I allowed him to be deceived. Well, it all came out yesterday—’

‘And how would this money have come to your sister?’ he asked.

‘It was willed her by a party she lived with, and more was willed to her child.



They're both dead, poor things; so why should not we have it?' she continued.

'Ah, why not?' agreed Baker; 'the party's name who willed it being—'

'Turner Sudgrove,' she replied.

'Related to Miles Sudgrove?' he inquired.

'Elder brother.'

'The deuce!'

'You asked your father's name once.'

'And you told me. Nothing very great, eh?' he hazarded.

'I'm sure, he was a most respectable butler, where I was ladies' maid, and we were to have been married correct enough —' said she, bridling up.

'All right, mother, I don't reproach you. I suspect, then, Noyes allowed me to wed Selina, in hopes I should get something as this Sudgrove's son,' he suggested.

'Not a doubt of it,' she replied.

'Then we shall have a rough time of it with him after the honeymoon. I'm sorry you have to bolt, old lady,' he continued.

‘So am I; Harvey and me never had such a time of clover,’ she sighed; ‘I’ve had the prudence, however, to save a few hundreds unbeknown to him, knowing this would never last. In a year or two, when this has blown over, I intend to come back and open a public-house with the money. I always had a turn for keeping the bar. Melusina, she was as quiet as a mouse.’

‘Won’t the drink be too much for my step-papa?’ said Vincent.

‘We shall see,’ she mused. ‘Now, I’ll just come and kiss Selina; mind, not a word to her yet, and then I must catch the afternoon train to Dover.’

And so fade the Knoblauches from this narrative.

We turn now to Podster and Noyes, in debate at Fish-street Hill the day after the reading of the will.

‘In fact,’ summed up the attorney, with a gesture of disgust, ‘when a man is too blind to see a sparrow, he is too blind to

see a hay-stack. I have been too sharp, and this is the result.'

'Yet the evidence favoured your blunder,' consoled Podster, biting his pen. 'Let's review the case. The whole documentary evidence lies on the table: first, Mrs Pannier's letter; next and last, a copy of Turner Sudgrove's will.'

'That's it,' resumed Noyes; 'the vagueness of this accursed washerwoman began the mischief. Her "Melly Baker" was to me, naturally, Melusina Baker. Her "other one," to be read, "other sister," I referred to Turner Sudgrove, and so on through this precious document. When a man is blind, he is sand-blind.'

'You adopt the boy?' inquired Podster, 'believing him Turner's reputed son.'

'Certainly I believed him so; but I wanted an odd boy as well,' assented Noyes.

'Vincent re-found his mother by advertisement?' said Podster.

'Yes; but the fact was, I incited him

to try this course,' allowed Noyes; 'and the perversity of the thing is, he summoned her as "Melly Baker" again; for he knew only this letter of Pannier's, and stuck to its text for safety. In fact, when this woman first arrived, I doubt, on reflection, if she knew she was taken for her sister. The crowning part of my stupidity was, that I had actually seen this real Melusina some twenty years since; and there is certainly a likeness between them, which must have added to my false confidence.'

'So much for by-gones,' cried Podster. 'Cheer up, sir; the greatest generals have blundered once or twice. We'll pay out Snewing & Co. yet.'

'I wish I thought so,' responded Noyes, with his head between his hands and his elbows on the table. 'I would spend my last sixpence to oust that blackguard.'

'Now, lookee here,' explained Podster, 'the great question now is, what became of the real Melusina and her child, if she ever had one. The smaller question is, assum-

ing the will genuine, what is become of Josiah Wilson and Martha Bingle, the witnesses.'

'The will genuine?' echoed Noyes.  
'Who could have forged it?'

'Excuse my saying so,' smiled Podster, 'but I thought at one time you had.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared the attorney, determined to take things pleasantly, 'I believe Snewing thinks so still.'

'Beyond question he does,' replied Podster, earnestly. 'You are bound, in mere self-defence, to institute a series of counter-inquiries.'

'Who's to make 'em?'

'Podster, Esquire.'

'Terms?'

'According to results.'

'All right,' said Noyes. 'How will you begin? Mrs Knoblauch is off. Besides, she can know very little about her sister.'

'I shall begin,' Podster replied, 'by a leisurely inspection of all the burial re-

gisters for the radius of a mile round Turner Sudgrove's suburban retreat.'

'No use that,' suggested Noyes. 'At Turner's death the establishment would go to pieces at once. I believe our friend Miles cleared her out sharpish. Manifestly, she did not die there. She needn't have died at all.'

'Then I must try to trace the witnesses,' rejoined Podster; 'I sha'n't give it up without turning every stone.'

'When will you begin?' said Noyes.

'To-morrow, with the burial-grounds,' replied Podster.

'You'll come here every evening to report,' reminded the attorney.

'As regular as clock-work,' concluded the other.

On the evening of this council of war between Noyes and Podster, another war-like personage, Captain Worboys, met Miss Violet Wicker by appointment in Hanover Square. Worboys was playful, affectionate,

jocular. Violet sullen, pettish, and generally irritable.

‘So this little lady is actually to become Mrs Fearon Comper next Wednesday as ever is,’ said the Captain, airily.

‘I suppose so, yes,’ she returned with a pout; ‘rather odd my meeting you here in my present engaged position.’

‘Not at all, Violet,’ reassured the Captain; ‘think what old friends we are. ’Pon my honour, I’m monstrous sorry you are going to be married, now I think of it.’

‘Come, that is good,’ she retorted. ‘Why, who but yourself got up the match?’

‘Does that mend matters to me?’ returned Worboys. ‘You are such a doocid neat girl, and a confoundedly clever one.’

‘Thank you, Captain,’ said she with a mock curtesy.

‘I say, Violet, this fellow is a lout, and a cub, and not a tithe part good enough for you,’ protested Worboys warmly.

‘We poor girls must settle when we

get a chance,' responded Violet, sententiously.

'Ain't you tired of this fellow already?' questioned the gallant officer.

'Perhaps,' admitted Violet, looking sideways, through the corners of her eyes.

'I say, damn it—' began he.

'A remark, I fancy, you have often made before; eh, Captain?' said Violet, sparkling up for the moment.

'Hang it, old girl, don't chaff,' protested Worboys. 'I'm serious, that I am; I don't believe there is a more stylish or better shod girl this side of Temple Bar, and certainly not beyond it.'

'My dear Captain,' reasoned Violet, practically, 'you mean, no doubt, for the moment, what you say, and thank you for saying it. But one lout, who will marry me, is worth twenty Captains, who are only good for compliments.'

'You are a dayvelish shrewd girl,' pronounced Worboys, with an admiring glance.



‘Come, Captain,’ she insisted with an effort, ‘shake hands and good-bye. I shall not come again. I was silly to come to-night. A nice state Fearon would be in—’

‘Don’t drive a cove so hard,’ entreated he.

‘Stuff, come, let me get back,’ she persuaded.

‘There are better chaps than Fearon, who might be got to marry you, old girl,’ said he, bringing the words out with a sort of reluctance.

‘Where?’ inquired she earnestly and incredulously.

‘Here,’ cried Worboys with a gulp. ‘Here, Violet; damn it, I can’t hand you over to that infernal dolt. I’ll marry you, out of hand, myself, sooner.’

‘Are you serious, Captain?’ she asked hurriedly. ‘Why didn’t you speak before? I can’t now, positively I can’t.’

‘I’m as serious as a tax-collector,’ he

resumed; 'and as for time, any time is time enough for bolting, short of the church-door; and, I'm not prepared to say, that it might not be done even later. Come, say "Yes," Violet. Now you will, won't you? We'll start for Paris to-morrow, next day, when you will; and get spliced there.'

'But Fearon will be wild,' she hesitated.

'And Snewing will be wilder,' he echoed.

'Him I met in the prison?' she asked.

'The very same,' rejoined Worboys. 'The Comper match was his scheme, not mine. He has slaved me too hard lately, and by bolting with you, I declare myself independent of him. You'll consent; there, I know you will.'

'I'd rather you married me before we started, Captain,' she suggested; 'just for extra and abundant caution, you know.'

'Oh, what a shrewd girl this is,' mur-

mured the admiring captain, 'what a tremendous acute girl.'

'Then, on these terms, Captain,' concluded Violet, 'I've no objection to a continental trip.'





## CHAPTER X.

### FAST FRIENDS MUST PART.


**D**OVEY Snewing had risen on the wrong side of his bed. He expected Worboys, and the Captain was behind his time. His haddock at breakfast had been unusually salt. The shares in the Spanish Castles Company had fallen. Mrs Pipechick, in the first sketch for their settlement, had not shown that child-like and trustful reliance on Snewing, which that gentleman felt was only due to the high character he bore. In fine, Dovey Snewing was put out generally, and damned the gallant Worboys in

audible accents for delaying to arrive. Now Worboys, who had already arranged the programme of his flight with Violet, came perfectly ready to pick a quarrel with his chief, should Snewing give him the least excuse for doing so. And, to assert his incipient independence, inasmuch as punctuality is a slavish habit, Captain Worboys was purposely behind his time. Things being thus circumstanced, our readers will join us in deploring, that these two amiable gentlemen should have been allowed by fate to encounter each other, under so inauspicious a concurrence of events. At last behold Worboys at King Street, with a jaunty air of superabundant leisure on his hands.

‘Gad, you haven’t hurried yourself,’ growled Snewing as he entered.

‘You’re right, my boy, I haven’t,’ replied Worboys, with a grin, humming insolent little snatches of melody.

‘You take it deuced coolly, I must say,’ snarled Snewing, with growing anger,



‘considering the “Castles” have fallen again.’

‘Dear boy,’ said Worboys, with a malevolent smile, ‘I am happy as a bird. I sing. Why should I not be cool? All I have can be realized in half an hour. I have no interest in landed estates and lovely widows. Equity may sell Worboys up any moment. You may press me for your bond. Equity will find only straw to reward her judicial labours. You will solely be rewarded by my incarceration for a few days.’

‘Confound you,’ broke out Snewing, ‘you talk as if the Company were wound up already, as if it were no longer a going concern.’

‘Keep your temper,’ rejoined Worboys. ‘I say, old boy, if the rest of the board guessed, what you, and I, and the secretary know, how long would this going concern, as you call it, remain in an uncollapsed condition?’ and we regret to say, the gallant Captain laid one finger

along his nose, in an eminently facetious, but slightly vulgar, manner.

‘Suppose and suppose,’ sneered Snewing, ‘you are primed with pleasant contingencies this morning. Who is to tell these worthies of the board, in the devil’s name?’

‘Don’t heat yourself about it, dear fellow,’ simpered Worboys. ‘Let us put a case, merely a case, you know. *I* might find it my painful duty to tell them.’

‘And I,’ retorted Snewing fiercely, ‘might find it as disagreeably imperative to kick you down-stairs first and lock you up afterwards.’

‘And neither likely to come off,’ said Worboys, leaning forward to light a cigar. ‘Come, Snewing, old man, that scowl doesn’t improve your looks. The fair Pipechick would hardly recognize her smooth-faced darling.’

‘Lookie here, Worboys, I’m in no humour for chaff and tomfoolery this morning,’ muttered Snewing, bringing his

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hand down upon the chimney-piece. 'What has come over you? I hardly know you? No man had better try his humours with me.'

'Altered, am I?' echoed Worboys, 'and, by Gad, there's room for improvement, too, in one thing. I'm tired of doing your dirty work, my boy, any longer.'

'You must have taken leave of whatever sense you possess,' roared Snewing, 'to treat me to this display of insolence.'

'My good sir, don't bluster,' pursued Worboys with sarcastic intonation, 'I have reckoned up all the thunderbolts you can launch to crush me, the result being I don't mind them.'

'Then,' cried Snewing with a very ugly smile, 'I must mention at the Club, this afternoon, the curious circumstance of a private soldier, who deserted, having past as a militia captain. Bare your manly chest, O great commander! Inconvenient, rather, I fancy.'

'Thunderbolt one,' enumerated Wor-



boys, 'to be accompanied by the equally singular and concurrent circumstance of a petition to wind up the Spanish Castles Company.'

'If I wasn't a gentleman, I'd beat your rotten skull in,' vociferated Snewing, with his hand upon the poker. 'I can't squabble with *you*, deserter! Leave the room.'

'Such a gentleman we are,' sneered Worboys, 'such an extra-super double-milled knock-me-down quality of a gentleman. Smuts must not drop on his gloves, and dust must not settle on his boots. And we must fall on our faces as he goes by, and run all his dirty errands with thankful hearts. He orders us about by the right of his gentility. What condescension, what surprising affability!'

'This is a very contemptible hound,' answered Snewing, taking an opera-dancer in full flight depicted above his chimney-piece into his confidence. 'I wonder I ever associated with him. If a policeman passes on the pavement opposite, I shall

take the liberty of telegraphing the executive, and having this deserter removed.'

'This fellow really begins to amuse me,' retorted Worboys, making a young lady in crayons on the wall, who seemed to have mislaid the greater part of her wardrobe, the recipient of his hilarity. 'I like his little pop-gun threats, his little harmless assumptions of superiority. I wonder, if he will succeed in bringing up the housekeeper by the noise he is making. It seems, he has succeeded, for here is the amiable lady herself in the excitement of breathless arrival.'

'What is wrong, gentlemen?' demands the housekeeper aforesaid; 'why, your voices will shake the walls down; whatever is amiss?'


'Have the goodness to summon a police-officer, Mrs Nabbins,' broke out Snewing, shaking his fist at the Captain.

'Spare your legs, Mrs Nabbins,' interposed Worboys, detaining her by the sleeve. 'I'm off. Little breezes will arise

between the best of friends, Mrs Nabbins; see that Mr Snewing puts his feet into hot water to-night. Blood to the head, dear Mrs Nabbins, and if he should insist on tallowing his nose, humour him, poor fellow. Bye, bye; take care of yourself, Snewing, my boy; remember what a gentleman you are; love to Pipechick.'

And the valorous Worboys, having thus nobly vindicated his independence of character, descended the staircase whistling some popular contemporaneous melody; and proceeded to keep an appointment with Miss Violet Wicker, at which some further details of their contemplated continental trip were to be arranged.

These being settled to his satisfaction, Worboys called in due course on four directors of the Spanish Castle Company limited; and succeeded, by a frank ingenuousness, in stirring up such panic in the minds of those gentlemen as to some late unauthorized proceedings of Snewing's and the secretary, that they agreed at once to



call a meeting to test the accuracy of the Captain's intelligence. Having thus done his worst against his former patron, Worboys began leisurely to pack his portmanteau for his visit to the French Capital.





## CHAPTER XI.

### WHY CLARA SAT UP ALL NIGHT.

**H**OOD COMPER is lying on an invalid's couch in his own house. Clara Gow is nursing him, and holds an open novel in her hand, which she has been reading aloud to her paralyzed brother. Since the day of her difference with Stephen, Clara has lived in her brother's house. She has managed to find some distraction from her domestic troubles in nursing Hood assiduously. The time is evening.

‘Hood, dear,’ she said, glancing up, and still retaining her finger in the book,

‘ Mr Noyes has written to me this morning.’

‘ Any new trouble about Stephen ? ’ demanded the invalid, with a kind of weary irritability.

‘ No, dear, Stephen has done all he can against me in sending me home,’ she returned quietly, folding her hands, while the book fell at her feet. ‘ What new sorrow can Stephen devise me ? ’

‘ You are proud, Clara, you are proud,’ pressed the sick man ; ‘ the least penitence, the least explanation, would right this, even now.’

‘ He has suspected me. Is not that enough, Hood ? ’ she answered, sighing. ‘ But about Mr Noyes’ letter, dear. Can you attend a little ? ’

‘ You know I am not in a state to talk business,’ he complained pettishly.

‘ This is so simple,’ she persuaded, ‘ it need not bother your poor head the very least. You know that dreadful Mr Snewing—’

The sick man became here extremely restless.

‘Marries Georgina Pipechick, and so gets all poor Brian should have had from his father—’

‘Why fret me with this, Clara?’ he whined querulously. ‘Can I, lying crippled here, resist fate? The unjust always prosper. The world is crooked. The greater the scoundrel, the sweeter life comes to his hand. Leave me alone to die by inches.’

‘My poor Hood,’ she consoled, ‘but perhaps we two, weak as we are, may help to baulk his prosperity.’

‘He is strong, Clara, he is strong,’ whined Hood; ‘even blind chance and inanimate matter seem to fight on his side.’

‘Our father, Hood—’

‘Well, Clara?’

‘Knew Turner Sudgrove well, heard from him often.’

‘Turner Sudgrove, Clara? you confuse me,’ he said, querulously; ‘why, you were

on Miles Sudgrove just now, or Brian, eh ?’

‘Yes, dear, my fault, I changed too abruptly,’ she pacified him. ‘But now as to Turner ; never mind the other two,—father had letters from him ?’

‘I dare say, why not ? Please don’t bother me with remembering, Clara ;’ and he shut his eyes, as if to shut off the subject as well.

‘Suppose any such letters remain in our father’s effects, where do you think they can be, dear ?’ she persisted. ‘I do not ask to worry you, but Mr Noyes is so anxious.’

‘There are piles and piles again of father’s letters,’ he rejoined, with an impatient change of position. ‘How should I know ? Consider, Clara, how absurd of you to ask me.’

‘Lend me your keys, dear,’ entreated Clara, ‘I don’t mind trouble. I should be so happy to help against Mr Snewing, if only by a pin’s weight.’

‘I wish you would let me either go to



sleep, or that you would go on with the novel,' he remonstrated fretfully.

'So you shall, the moment you have lent me your keys,' she said, coaxing him.

'I can't remember where they are,' he protested querulously.

'O Hood, darling, try; oh, do try for my sake,' she entreated.

'It's the third drawer on the left of that writing-table,' he drawled, reluctantly.

'That's my good boy,' she encouraged him, producing the keys. 'Now shall we go on with the book, dear, or will you sleep?'

A knock at the door, and a servant with a slip of paper hastily folded, and written upon in pencil.

Clara took it in and read—

'I have been a fool, Clara. I have come to beg Hood's pardon and yours. Let me come up, don't refuse to see me. Fearon Comper.'

'I suppose he may come up, eh, Hood?' asked Clara.

‘I suppose so,’ assented Hood. ‘It only means, I fear, that he is quite out of money.’

So Fearon was shown into the sick-room, looking extremely penitent, and with hardly a vestige of his usual effrontery remaining. His hair unbrushed, his face unshaven, and his cravat extremely limp; which little details spoke volumes for Mr Fearon’s state of perturbation; as, usually, he was quite capable of oiling and arranging his locks on the eve of an earthquake, had it been likely to occur.

‘You want money, eh?’ demanded the sick man.

‘Indeed, Hood, I don’t for once,’ denied Fearon, with a rueful and ghastly smile.

Hood stared at him in extreme astonishment.

‘Hood and Clara,’ began Fearon, ‘I’m knocked all of a heap, and hardly know what I’m doing. I was to have married Miss Wicker in a few days, and I was most deucedly fond of her.’

‘Was to have married?’ echoed Clara. ‘O Fearon, this is joyful news! Listen to this, Hood, listen.’

‘Don’t crow over a man that’s down, Clara,’ expostulated Fearon; ‘it’s come on me like a sledge-hammer. I can never hold up my head among fellows again. It ain’t the girl I mind so much as the chaff.’

‘Then Miss Wicker has thrown you over,’ said Clara eagerly. ‘O Fearon, this is not a thing to grieve about.’

‘Worse,’ pursued Fearon, ‘a deal worse. She’s bolted to Paris with that scoundrel Worboys, gone off with him who first introduced me to her; left me a letter to say, I’d no manners, and less brains; and the thing was a game on her part from the beginning; when I could have wagered that she idolized my very shadow.’

‘My poor boy,’ said Clara, with ready sympathy, ‘I expected no less in the end; but I feared she would have married you first.’

‘And I hear that Snewing and Wor-

boys quarrelled, the day before Worboys bolted,' went on Fearon; 'and that Snewing now threatens to prosecute Worboys; and gives it out generally, that Worboys never was a captain, but only a private, who deserted years back. And the talk goes, that Worboys knows some awkward things about Snewing, on his side; which only shows how a fellow can be deceived in people.'


'The tide is turning at last, dear Hood,' exclaimed Clara; 'when the camp of our enemies are beginning to quarrel among themselves, it is a sign that their downfall is imminent.'

'Well, Clara and Hood,' continued Fearon in a doleful voice, 'I've been a fool, but I hope to mend. I've behaved badly enough to both of you. I've spent my money and been jilted. I shall try my luck in the colonies, and steady down there, I hope. If Hood will stand my outfit I shall be grateful; if he won't, I've no right to complain. I'll work my own passage

out. But as to going, my mind is made up.'

So Hood and Clara received the prodigal kindly enough; and, applauding his plan of emigration, talked over future prospects till the invalid's early hour of resting, when Hood retired and Fearon returned to his chambers.

Left alone, Clara at once proceeded to her portentous task of looking through her father's letters. Her heart nearly failed within her at the mere bulk of epistolary correspondence, which Hood's keys laid at her disposal. With a kind of dogged resolution she determined to sit up all night, and go methodically through all the letters she could. She accepted, like an imaginative woman, an omen of success in Fearon's broken off nuptials and Snewing's rupture with his ally. Till 3 A.M. she pursued her task without a trace of the name she wanted. Her eyeballs were beginning to ache, and her pulse to beat feverishly.



Old letters from herself and brothers when children, old letters relative to city transactions long since forgotten, all that dreadful bankruptcy correspondence, her mother's notes to her father before they married—a grim band of ghosts rising from each fresh bundle she untied, till the very atmosphere of the room seemed to swarm with them. Still parcel succeeded parcel, and on Clara read. Just upon day-break she stumbled on a bundle of private letters; evidently a miscellaneous heap, as there seemed no one connecting link between them. A strange thrill came over her, for she had met with no bundle of a precisely similar character, none so likely to contain what she wanted. A gleam at length! The last letter but one is from 'Turner Sudgrove actually! but, alas, a mere hurried reply to a dinner invitation; but this very last letter is longer, and, joyful to relate, in the same handwriting. With tremulous fingers she unfolded the

yellowing sheets, and read as follows:—

‘Richmond Villa, Hampstead, Jan. 3.

‘MY DEAR COMPER,

‘As you would not come to dinner last night, I must bother you with my perplexities on paper. I want your advice, Sina wants your advice. I can tell you the poor child felt your failing us last night bitterly. She is uncomfortable about me, and can only pour out her griefs to you. I suppose, too, I ought to be uneasy about myself; but then the city leaves me no time for being so. The doctors persist, that, unless I move to a warmer climate at once, they cannot give me a year more. How can I move? It would take me at least six months to get in and realize all I have out in different ventures, and even then I should lose. Then this habit and thirst of money-making is so strong upon me, that, like a fool, I must go on, with, perhaps, only six months’ life in me. Poor Sina! except for her, I really care very

little. And now a new complication has arisen, for the poor child more than half suspects—however, that will keep till we are certain; the duty I owe her, to make her every reparation in my power, for the ambiguous position I have placed her in, is equally imperative, be she right or be she wrong, in what she begins to suppose. After all, with all my wealth, whom have I to care for in the world except Sina? My brother is a pompous selfish man, who, if I were starving, would not move his little finger to get me a clerk's place. You will say, at least you won't, who know her exquisite grace; but the world will, and sneer and wonder how I, a highly educated man, can be so infatuated (that's the current phrase) about a girl that sometimes misplaces her aspirates. Let them wonder. The strange thing is that the rest of Sina's people should be so atrocious. Heaven preserve me from the sister, for example—a caricatured coarse likeness of my pet, with a voice like a dragoon. She



arrived yesterday. Sina, who had not seen her for two years, and in the interval had moulded herself to me with her surprising tact and quickness of adaptability, shrunk as much from her nearly as I did; and begged me, after the sister went, to keep them somehow apart. In fact, she was quite low-spirited about her noisy, pushing incubus of a sister; and was only cheered up by a domestic blunder of our servant, that queer little thickset man you have seen here, with his face all over knobs; at which my poor child went into fits of laughter. How I do run on, and what trivial nonsense I write. One more word about Sina and I have done. To show you how utterly she trusts me, fancy her bringing for my perusal a letter from that she-dragon her mother; scolding her first, because, as the worthy lady judiciously phrased it, "Sina let me off too easy, and did not get enough out of me. Mr S. was rich as a Jew, would refuse

Sina nothing ; if Sina didn't want it for herself, it was a daughter's duty to provide for her own family," and much more in the same vein. It was very touching of her bringing me this. I never saw a girl care so little about money. She knows, she has only to ask to drive me into the most absurd profusion for her sake, and yet she never will do so. And I, to tell the truth, shrink from doing anything extravagant for her ; feeling as if this kind of thing would vulgarize her, make her like the scores of other selfish girls in her position, who get money lavished on them as a matter of course. Meanwhile my darling is low about me, and, as I hinted, about herself. We have been so fearfully happy together, that I can hardly conceive an ending so abrupt as the doctors predict. Fancy a hard money-making man writing, as I am writing to you. I should be ashamed to do so to any one else. But you know Sina, and that is enough. Come

and see me without delay. Come and talk all this over.

‘Yours ever,

‘TURNER SUDGROVE.’

Poor Clara, who was not endowed with the severe virtue of Aurelia Van the regenerator, was touched by this simple record of by-gone happiness. While Aurelia would have mentally rushed to the nearest stone-heap to select an appropriate missile for the demolition of Sina, Clara only felt gentle sorrow for the girl and her affectionate sincerity, while all the blame of her equivocal surroundings she felt inclined to lay at the doors of those needy harpies, her relations. ‘Well,’ thought Clara, ‘the letter did not contain much likely to help Mr Noyes; but, such as it was, he should have it; for,’ she argued, ‘these lawyers could sometimes make a clue where laymen saw none;’ and Noyes had warned her, that the most trivial details of Turner Sudgrove’s last few years were invaluable.

Then, too, Clara perceived, by the dates that Noyes had given her, that this letter belonged to the last year of Turner Sudgrove's life. So, after enclosing it in an envelope to the attorney, she went to rest, utterly worn out by the fatigues of her search, and found the broad light of a new day creeping through the shutters.





## CHAPTER XII.

### KEDGE TO THE RESCUE.

**A**FTER a short interval, behold Brian Sudgrove quite again installed at Memoria Lodge, contrary to all our expectations; and, stranger still, Helen and Samson only in the parlour with him. How comes the vigilant Mrs Rainbird to allow these three persons, whose worldly wisdom she held at such a discount, the luxury of a quiet interview, undisturbed by the bracing influences of her visible example and emphatic axioms?

Samson is speaking.

‘ So Mrs Rainbird whipped the girls off

to her cousin's in Kent. He keeps a sight of greyhounds, to be sure, and wears fungus-coloured gaiters. However, that's neither here nor there. She made me accompany them, for fear of garotters under the seat of the railway carriages; though I'm certain that kind of person would be much more cowed by Mrs Rainbird than by myself. I wished to return next day, having a neatish thing in mural tablets to commemorate the widow of a pork-butcher on hand; but Mrs Rainbird's cousin insisted on my seeing his drains. Accordingly, it was an awful day for me. Sufficient to remark, that Mrs Rainbird's cousin had shown much ingenuity, it appeared to me, in concentrating all the moisture of the surrounding districts into his own particular fields. When I say splosh would describe that region of Mrs Rainbird's cousin's, I have given but a faint description; not to mention the clay, which seemed to have a peculiar tenacity for a stranger. Next morning, I regret to say, Mrs Rainbird

and Loo each came out with a lively rash, which the rural faculty pronounced measles of a very mild kind. Mrs Rainbird was so astonished at having anything really the matter with her, that she became quite composed, and sent off Helen with me back to town; lest she should catch it, and, being caught, it might bring her hair off; which, Mrs Rainbird said, would damage Helen in a matrimonial point of view. I am sorry to say she threatened me very bad, if I should let you, Sudgrove, into the house; but as Kedge admitted you and not I, I cannot be held accountable for your present visit, though I am sure we are very glad to see you; and the fact, I think, Helen my dear, need not be brought under your mother-in-law's notice.'

'I hope the invalids are going on well,' said Brian.

'Mrs Rainbird's cousin's wife writes me reports,' replied Samson. 'She says it's a mere fleabite of measles. They seem to treat most complaints in that district of

Kent with hot elder wine. Mrs Rainbird's cousin's wife's mother always treated her so ; so she says, she hopes she knows her duty to those who are gone, sufficiently, to treat every one else under her care in a similar manner.'

'I can't say,' pursued Brian, 'that I am not most thankful to have got this chance of explaining things to you and Helen quietly ; Mrs Rainbird being a little apt to form a certain view independently of circumstances, and when formed adhere to it.'

'Quite so,' agreed Samson naïvely ; 'her firmness is quite remarkable. I'm sure I miss her very much. The house seems one vast quietness. The silence quite frightens me. The feeling of being able to speak, without minding what you're saying, is actually embarrassing to me, I assure you, Sudgrove.'

'As to the mischievous letter and this unlucky business about Mrs Gow,' went on Brian ; 'had your wife condescended to consult Helen, she might have learnt how



entirely innocuous the sting was of such an accusation. Helen knows that Mrs Gow is my earliest friend, my almost sister, my confidant during the whole of my acquaintance with your daughter. Mrs Gow was on her way here to see Helen, when that absurdly jealous husband of hers, worked upon by the same faction that sent the anonymous letter to your wife, chose to pick a quarrel with her. She is high-spirited, did not choose to be doubted, and would not explain. Helen is satisfied, ain't you, dearest?'

'My dear papa,' cried Helen, 'if you and my mother-in-law had only taken me into your councils, poor Brian might have been spared infinite worry. That Mrs Gow and I should meet somehow has been a promise since quite the early days I knew Brian.'

'I'm sure, I'm very grieved that I wrote to you as I did, Sudgrove,' said Samson.

'My poor papa,' whispered Helen,

‘ Brian and I lay that letter very little at your doors.’

‘ We know who guided the pen,’ added Brian.

‘ Certainly, my dear,’ observed Samson ; ‘ your mother-in-law has a way of bearing down all opposition before her ; which if she were, say, a British statesman, might do the country unspeakable good. As she is not a British statesman, I fear her energy is rather misdirected—occasionally.’

‘ Look here, Mr Rainbird,’ began Brian, drawing Helen to him, and taking her hand, ‘ here are your daughter and I.’

‘ Quite so,’ allowed Samson ; ‘ I’m quite prepared to concur in that remark. Only it’s as well, quite as well, that Mrs Rainbird is in Kent at the present moment.’

‘ I’ve every chance now,’ insisted Brian, ‘ of a steady income of some eighty pounds a year. We shall never gain such another opportunity of getting quietly married, Helen and I, without fuss and unpleasantness, as during this involuntary absence of

your wife's. Come, Mr Rainbird, pluck up a spirit. I'll get the license to-morrow, and marry Helen on Tuesday.'

Helen said nothing, but kissed Brian very quietly.

'Good heavens, my dear Sudgrove,' gasped Samson, 'you take my breath away. How could I encounter Mrs Rainbird, when she has weathered her cutaneous disorder? You really have no conception, Sudgrove, of Mrs Rainbird when roused.'

'She's a practical person,' reasoned Brian; 'once we're married, she will take it quietly enough. At present she resists, tooth and nail, merely because she thinks Helen, with her brilliant beauty, "owes it to herself," that is Mrs Rainbird's expression, to make a better investment than myself. But as Helen is content to put up with me, I don't really see what Mrs Rainbird has to do with it. You are her father, her own father, and would let me marry her to-morrow, I know.'

‘Well,’ hesitated Samson, ‘if I would personally, I should not wish it repeated, you know. Mrs Rainbird is a woman of such remarkable will, that she generally likes to arrange everything according to her own view; energetic people generally do.’

‘Come, Mr Rainbird, give us your consent, and Helen and I will risk the rest,’ suggested Brian.

Samson looked the picture of benevolent and distressed uncertainty.

At this moment Kedge took it upon herself to enter the apartment.

‘I’ve eared all,’ observed Kedge curtly, advancing to the table and leaning her bony wrist upon it. ‘I’eared all. I took the liberty of listening out there.’

‘Really, Kedge, you shouldn’t,’ murmured Samson, reproachfully.

‘Did I know what was to be talked of, with her away,’ adjured Kedge, impressively, ‘or did I not? Have I right to listen when you talk about marrying


her I chiefly spoon-fed, or have I not? Am I a kind of guardian, alonger you, Master Rainbird, of that precious darling, bless her pretty face, or am I not? I'm only a servant here, but I've a right to speak now or never.'

'My dear Kedge,' exclaimed Samson, 'I look on you quite as a friend, you know.'

'Ah,' pursued Mrs Kedge, 'I says to myself, that young man of Miss Helen's will be wanting to marry her off, now your present wixen of a wife is took with measl'ing off the premises.'

'Really, Kedge, you shouldn't,' remonstrated Samson, mildly.

'Now, fond of him she is,' continued Kedge, 'and he ain't your selfish sort, for he has given up his property for her; and, with what men is in general, it ain't so easy to find one, that will give up anything. He'll want to marry her, says I, in this gleam of blessed quietness, which may it long continue; and Mister Rainbird will



be too afeared of her, that's rashing in the provinces, to give his leave, though well I know he wishes it in his inwards. If he's frightened of his present wixen, says I, it's your dooty, Kedge, to frighten him more of you !'

At this tremendous threat of Kedge, Samson quailed visibly.

'Lookee here,' exclaimed Kedge, with new ardour, 'I'm going to talk to you now about your wife that is gone; I'm going to mind you of Helen's mother, if I gets a month and my wages on the spot.'

'I can't bear it, Kedge,' entreated Samson; 'you know I can't bear it.'

'Then you give 'em leave to get married,' commanded Kedge, fiercely, 'and you go alonger them and see her married; or, if you don't, I'll have suthin to say to the second Mrs Rainbird, that'll make her give it you more than fifty marriages when she's off on a excursion measling.'

'You mean well, Kedge,' he replied; 'I see, I ought to consent. I well know

how attached you are to Helen, how faithful you were to Helen's mother.'

'Kedge,' cried Brian, 'you have proved yourself an invaluable ally. Of course you'll come and see us married, too.'

'Kedge, give me a kiss, you dear old rude creature,' exclaimed Helen.

Kedge's motions during the embrace were too many for her, but she managed to murmur the single word 'spoon-fed.'

'And now, axing your pardon, master, for what I've made bold in dooty to speak, I'll go and see after that rice-pudding.'

'No apology is needed, Kedge,' said Samson, softly. 'I was wrong to hesitate here. It was selfish in me to vacillate from fear of any consequences to myself. Get married, my children, at once. I shall be lonely without Helen, she reminds me so much of an angel that's dead; and the present Mrs Rainbird has many good qualities, but sometimes I think she is a little deficient in, shall we say, repose?'

So Samson departed after Kedge, and the lovers were left alone.

‘How wonderful it seems,’ said Brian, ‘we are going to be married, love; going to be married actually. Are you sorry, dear?’

‘Perhaps, just a little, love,’ she replied, ‘a tiny little tear for a sweet foolish time. Perhaps it will alter you to me, Brian; I do not want you altered.’

‘And would you have been sorry,’ he demanded, ‘to have lost all this heavy-twisted, moonlight-coloured hair, Helen.’

‘Yes, love, I should,’ she said, simply, ‘for you are fond of it, Brian, and you would have missed it.’

‘My conceited little girl,’ he laughed.

‘I like being beautiful, if you think me so, Brian,’ she rejoined, ‘and if it makes you love me much.’

‘I’m sure, I wish I was less ugly, to please you more,’ he said.

‘Yes, I thought you ugly at first,’ she returned, simply.



‘And, now, I am what?’ he laughed.

‘And now you are Brian, simply Brian,’ she replied earnestly.

‘My dear child, that is self-evident. Why say it so emphatically?’ he continued.

‘You know what I mean well enough, sir,’ she replied, ‘and let me tell you I won’t be teased.’

And we are inclined to think that Brian did understand her emphasis after all.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE BRISTLE MERCHANT'S DEN.

**I** CAN'T report any trace yet of the missing Melusina,' said Podster to Noyes one morning at Fish-street Hill. 'I have been through dusty registers by the scores, grave-yards by the dozens; I have conversed with the oldest inhabitants all round Hampstead; I have found the very villa Turner Sudgrove must have lived in; I searched between the planks of the floors there, had all the carpets up, tried to suppose myself a maid-servant running from that very door for the doctor; did run several times, only

took different directions on each of them ; however, always went into the first medical brass-plate I passed. Doctor the first has only set up six years ; doctor the second was too busy to answer questions ; doctor the third has attended a Mrs Baker near there ; it might be twenty years back, had heard she was living now in Barnet. Off to Barnet I speed ; spend a whole morning unearthing Mrs Baker of Barnet. Do unearth her. A fearful woman with a wall eye. Ask her, casually, if she ever lived with a Mr Turner Sudgrove. Says she never was in service ; do I mean to insult her ? I stammer, lose my head, say, " Oh no, I mean in a tender capacity." She becomes speechless, and has me turned out in no time. Then I begin talking to all the shops, that have been established twenty years ; doing them systematically by comparing an old directory—a treasure—with a modern one. I'm getting through them gradually. They will take me till Wednesday. Hampstead is a biggish place.'

‘How you run on,’ said Noyes. ‘Now, hear my report. I wrote to Mrs Gow, as you suggested, to stir up her invalid brother to look through his father’s papers. You asked me who was Turner’s best friend; well, I fixed on old Comper. I’m not sure, but couldn’t remember any one else. Well, he did know him well, it seems. Poor Mrs Gow sat up all night to get us this; it gives us a contemporaneous glimpse into the Richmond villa ménage; and is most valuable, as corroborative of Turner’s intention to do something unusually handsome for Melusina, and of his hatred of his brother Miles. Read it.’

Podster perused the letter we are acquainted with eagerly.

‘Yes, this is the first real bit of scent we have got. I’ll read it again.’

So Podster did read the old letter again.

‘’Pon my honour,’ he said, ‘it’s deuced touching. I’m quite in love with this Melusina myself, whom I’ve been hunting

up so fruitlessly. Poor thing! she's dust, sure enough! But the child!—the child! I say, Noyes, this strengthens Turner's will. We shall beat Snewing on the point of its being genuine. This clears you, old fellow. But, if Melusina and child are both dead, the will is merely like an intestacy in the direction of its devolution. Miles Sudgrove gets all in either case. Eh?' .

'But, as to your search, is there any clue in this letter?' demanded Noyes.

'If you please, I'll read it a third time,' responded Podster cheerfully.

'I see nothing in it except a confirmation of the circumstances which explain Turner's will. As to the will, witnesses, or Mrs Baker and the child, I see nothing,' meditated Noyes.

'I say, Noyes, a foolish fancy is running in my head,' said Podster.

'Out with it, Podster,' encouraged the attorney.

'This servant with knobs over his face,' mused Podster. 'I know a fellow in Corn-

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wall that answers to that. Stay, he should be in town by this. I'll go and look him up at once. I shall only lose my cab-hire.'

'Your perseverance is really wonderful,' applauded Noyes.

'I know this is a very forlorn hope,' pursued Podster, ruefully.

'I can't deny that,' said Noyes, smiling.

'However, I'm off,' cried Podster, and on the spur of the moment he went.

The business premises of Mr Brimeswiggles were in the very heart of the city. They consisted of a moderately-sized yard, with a queer little square house in the centre. This contained two rooms—a largeish one, where five clerks wrote; a little parlour, where Brimeswiggles himself was wont to sit and transact matters of a bristly nature. This sanctum was amazingly comfortable, and to it Podster in due time was inducted. Brimeswiggles was superintending the packing of bristles in one of the sheds which lined the yard all round, would be disengaged directly, and could

Mr Podster take anything? Podster, declining refreshment, was left to look about him in the sanctum by a young gentleman, who evidently did the odd jobs of the establishment. Over the fire hung Pen-shingle, drawn from the ocean, showing that, even amid the distractions of the bristle trade, Brimeswiggles solaced himself with reminiscences of that romantic spot. On one side the fire sat evidently Brimeswiggles's cat, an animal with a curious family-look of its master. The room was warmly carpeted, and there were a perfect forest of hyacinths in glasses on the window-sill. On one wall hung a singularly gaunt and hideous profile in black, evidently of a female, with a bow at her breast. A formidable array of ledgers bristled, in more senses than one, above a substantial writing-desk.

Brimeswiggles hobbled in in due time with an air of effusive welcome mantling the inequalities of his countenance.

‘This is an unexpected visit,’ he cried,

seizing Podster cordially by the shoulder. 'You have unearthed me among the spoils of my defunct gruntern. They're vittals to me, and literature, is gruntern. Well, it's a pleasant pursuit. Still in the land-agenting department, eh, Podster?'

'I got my notice yesterday,' smiled Podster. 'My new landlord is a landlady, a widow she is, and a vixen. I ought to carry about a little flag, like the Manchester cabs, inscribed, to "hire."'

'That party died?' inquired Brimeswigg. 'Wasn't much good our drinking his health? Well, he was a nice speaker—so easy. What I liked about his delivery was, he didn't seem conscious of any one else being in the room but myself. It's temperament does it—'

'I don't quite understand,' hazarded Podster.

'Why, look here,' pursued Brimeswigg, 'it's so in our trade, and in humans similar. The differences we find—oh, the differences! When a pig frets



herself and can't enjoy existence calmly, and gets rubbing herself against walls, and teasing herself into indigestion; it stands to reason, she ain't likely to die a credit to herself or the bristle-market. Show me, says I, a animal's bristles, and I'll tell you her disposition. I believe them bald, tufty men, is usually Turks for temper.'

'The moral being,' said Podster, 'Don't heat yourself about trifles. I don't. I'm a land-agent at large without any land. I whistle. By the way, I've a question to ask you.'

'Twenty if you choose,' responded Brimeswiggle briskly. 'There happens to be some very fair sherry bitters in that little cupboard.'

'Not for me, indeed.'

'Just a thimbleful,' said he, producing it. 'Now, look at that for wiriness,' he added, inspecting a bristle with approval that he was using as a toothpick. 'There's length, there's consistency. For a hair-brush now—'

‘Your health, Mr Brimeswiggles.’

‘A question was it, Podster?’ reminded the other.

‘You’ll think me demented to ask you,’ hesitated Podster between his sips. ‘Dear me, these are most insinuating bitters; but did you ever happen to fall in with, or to have heard of, a certain Turner Sudgrove, brother to our Orpwood friend, and dead these twenty years? Of course you didn’t and haven’t, only it came across me to ask you; so no harm’s done.’

Brimeswiggles scratched his head, and trifled with his glass.

‘Who the devil put you up to asking me this?’ he exclaimed at last.

‘Can you be the man really I am looking for?’ cried Podster. ‘Hang it, Brimeswiggles, you don’t know how I’ve cast about for any one who remembers Richmond Villas.’

‘You know, then, in what capacity—’ stammered Brimeswiggles.

‘Yes, I suspect so; small blame in that,’

admitted Podster ; 'you've got on since, the more credit yours. You must give me a complete chronicle of the sayings and doings of this Turner and Mrs Melusina.'

'What's in the wind now?' demanded Brimeswiggles surprised; 'what's your purpose? Ah, deep, deep, Podster; if you were deep as a bagman, what must you be as a deputy-squire out of employment.'

'Who's the charming woman in black profile?' interrogated Podster. 'Doesn't happen to be the lovely Melusina, eh, you old fox?'

'You might be wider from the mark though,' allowed Brimeswiggles; 'that was Melusina's lady's maid.'

'You don't say so,' exclaimed Podster, with a start; 'what an invaluable old card you are!'

'Hang it,' remonstrated Brimeswiggles, 'you are deep to that extent, Podster, that I expect you'll work through, and come out on the other side some day. Now, it's no good your gaming me; it's no manner of

use your making believe to ask me questions. Why, man, you know all about it. Don't stand grinning at me. I'll be bound you could name that profile, if it didn't go against your deepness to seem to know.'

'I'll hazard one guess,' replied Podster. 'Anyhow, I want to mention the name to you. Let us say Martha Bingle?—well, why don't you say something?'

'Because you are old Nicholas,' returned Brimeswiggle. 'Why worm it out of me? It's all cut and dried in your own knowledge.'

'There was Martha Bingle and Josiah Wilson,' mused Podster.

'And uncommon little would she have to say to Josiah Wilson,' broke out Brimeswiggle, 'I can tell you. A good girl, for all that. Josiah was clumsy, was Josiah, and jealous was Josiah; fit to bite a fellow's head off, if he did but speak to her; so it ended in an ornamental stationer, as was only natural.'

‘Did you like this Josiah Wilson?’ said Podster.

‘Go along with you. Like him! Well, that is good,’ cried Brimeswiggles, winking.

‘You were there with him simultaneously?’ pursued Podster.

‘It were so simultaneous, that you couldn’t tell where one ended and t’other came on,’ said Brimeswiggles.

‘Riddles! You *were* Josiah Wilson!’ hazarded Podster.

‘You knew that well enough,’ asserted Brimeswiggles.

‘Indeed, you credit me with far too much astuteness. And Martha, is she dead, or can we find her?’

‘I saw a remarkable likeness of her the other day, through a window,’ rejoined Brimeswiggles; ‘but it ain’t her, if I’m to trust the baker of the neighbourhood. By Jove, though, the ornamental stationer may account for it. I never thought of him.’

‘There isn’t a moment to lose,’ cried

Podster. 'My dear Brimeswiggle, you are a treasure, a pearl; jump into your overcoat first, into a cab with me the moment after. We will drive like wing-spread ostriches in the direction of Martha's apparition. You shall refresh me on the road with anecdotes of Melusina. Do not linger. Cast not remorseful glances in the direction of your interrupted bristle-packing. What are a few brief bristles to the fate of the Orpwood estate!'





## CHAPTER XIV.

### CHECKMATE TO GEORGINA.

**A**GAIN has Gilbert Noyes convened, under Stephen Gow's sanction, in Russell Square, a meeting of persons interested in the will of Miles Sudgrove. Again were seated in conclave Georgina Pipechick, Dovey Snewing, Aurelia Van, Podster, Noyes, and Gow, with power to add to their number, as the prospectuses would say, which power will be in due time exercised.

'I cannot see any necessity of our meeting to-day,' began Snewing; 'but if executors choose to be troublesome, I suppose they must be humoured.'

‘There is new and additional evidence in the matter of Turner Sudgrove’s will,’ explained Gow.

‘To which instrument Mr Snewing applied the playful term forgery on a late occasion,’ added Noyes, drily.

‘Why did I use that expression?’ retorted Snewing, with flashing eyes. ‘I’ll tell you. Because it is a scrap produced from a dead man’s desk, who has an attorney for an executor; because it dates twenty years back, and was never heard of before; because both the witnesses are as mythical personages as John Doe and Richard Roe, as Robinson Crusoe or Jupiter.’

‘Podster,’ said Noyes, ‘have the goodness to call in number one.’

‘You make remarkably free with my premises, Mr Noyes,’ interposed Mrs Pipechick, with freezing severity. ‘You make yourself at home. What business have you to bring up people, like jacks-in-the-box, out of my housekeeper’s room?’



And, indeed, Brimeswiggles, entering that moment under convoy of Podster, did rather resemble a magnified toy of that description. Neither did Brimeswiggles improve the first impression his entrance made, by lapsing into one or two spasmodical chuckles.

‘Who is this old buffoon?’ asked Snewing, with a gesture of disgust.

‘A mythical and unsubstantial personage,’ sneered Noyes; ‘merely Josiah Wilson, the first witness to Turner Sudgrove’s will; now Josiah Brimeswiggles, a gentleman whose dealings in the bristle trade are considerable.’

‘This is a comic actor dressed up, and hired to lie by the hour,’ cried Snewing.

‘I say now,’ protested Brimeswiggles, advancing to the table, ‘I’m a vestry man, and a inspector of parochial nuisances, and a patriotic citizen. I’ve a freehold place in the city which is not likely to run away. If the vinegar-faced gentleman, who has took to Billingsgate so early

in the proceedings, would do me the favour of looking in some morning, he won't see many comic actors on the premises; unless it is himself, who begins to look rather in the ghost and murderer business just at present.'

'I think we had better get on, Mr Noyes,' suggested Gow mildly.

'Fetch up number two,' said Noyes cheerfully.

'This, ladies and gentlemen, is Martha Bingle,' announced Podster, ushering in number two. 'Marriage has changed her name to Martha Kedge. She is the second witness to Turner Sudgrove's will.'

'This is a more completely organized conspiracy than I was led to expect,' interrupted Snewing, with a sinister smile, 'even from the machinations of my amiable Mr Noyes. Let the hard swearing proceed, by all means. Now, Mrs Bingle, what have you got to say?'

'Glad to see you, mum,' begun Kedge, moving ironically to Aurelia. 'We have

met before, I'm aware. She come spying up where I live the other day ; pushing herself and worming of herself she come. She said her name was Gow, and she must order a tombstone. Nothing of the sort. She was hired to spy by some of them.'

Aurelia began to blow her nose violently. 'I really must beg to have this female removed,' she insisted tremulously.

'Do I understand you she gave the name of Mrs Gow ?' interposed Gow from the top of the table.

'Look at her a wincing ; she can't deny it,' indicated Kedge.

'Then I suppose, I owe you an unsigned letter I received lately, Miss Van, also ?' questioned Gow.

'That's her, sure enough. She sent one of those "anonymibus" letters to our place, too,' corroborated Kedge.

'I think, dearest Georgina,' sighed Aurelia, rising, 'that, as I feel rather faint, and fluttered by these most impertinent accusations, I'll take my leave. I can only

explain Mr Gow's rudeness by the effect which his wife's late giddy conduct has had upon his head.'

'Keep her here,' whispered Snewing to Georgina; 'she may be useful to us as a scapegoat further on.'

'Miss Van must remain,' said Gow sternly and decisively.

'Oh, certainly,' fluttered Aurelia, 'if you wish it. I was not aware a British female was liable to compulsion; but in so genteel a company we must take what manners we can get and be thankful; indeed, we must.'

'Hold your tongue,' said Snewing. 'Now, Mrs Kedge.'

'Oh, indeed,' hissed Aurelia, 'since they've wound up the Spanish Castles Company, every insolvent director, they say, has a right to tell people to hold their tongues. Pray, how is Captain Worboys, our inseparable?'

'She can use her claws, by jingo,' laughed Podster to Noyes.

‘That taunt about the Castles told on Snewing. They had best have let her go,’ returned Noyes to Podster, with a grin of reciprocity.

‘More company?’ exclaimed Mrs Pipechick, as the door-bell rang. ‘Go to the window, Aurelia, and see who it is.’

‘I declare if it isn’t Mr Hood Comper in his bath-chair,’ cried Aurelia.

Snewing looked grimmer than ever at this announcement.

‘You are improving in your evidence, Mr Noyes,’ he blustered; ‘perjury you propose, I see, to supplement by idiocy. Is this imbecile driveller to be carried in here?’

‘Such is our intention,’ replied Noyes coolly.

And Golland and Mugden, subsidized, we suspect, previously for that purpose by Noyes, carried in, in a cane-bottomed chair, Hood Comper, and placed him at the table.

‘Our ranks,’ observed Aurelia, ‘our

motley ranks are re-inforced by a cripple. How genteel.'

'Now we are ready to begin,' said Noyes. 'I may preface my narrative by saying, that, without a document in Mr Hood Comper's keeping, Mrs Pipechick would have probably remained the possessor of Orpwood.'

'This is the second good turn I owe you,' scowled Snewing in muttered tones to Hood. 'You are mad to bear evidence against me.'

'This fellow Snewing,' said Hood Comper, 'I have held my tongue about till now. The time has come to speak out.'

'This driveller,' rejoined Snewing, 'lost his wits some years back. His brain is as little trustworthy as his pinioned arm. He is about to speak some precious nonsense.'

'Snewing and I,' pursued Hood, 'were boys at one school. One day I found him in the very act of stealing money from the pocket of my boating-jacket. I thrashed

him severely; but as our respective families were on terms of intimacy, and on his representing that such an exposure would blast his prospects for life, I held my tongue. Since then this Snewing has pursued me with a most vindictive hatred.'

'Hallucination,' remarked Snewing, rather pale at the lips, and with a kind of momentary catch in his breath, 'mere hallucination.'

'We cannot go into extraneous charges now,' interposed Gow, 'let us keep to the business in hand, Mr Comper.'

'The letter Mr Noyes will read first,' continued Hood, 'came from among my father's papers. I vouch for its being genuine.'

Noyes then read the letter discovered by Clara during her nightly search.

'This proves,' interposed Noyes, 'that Mr Turner contemplated doing something unusually munificent for Melusina Baker. This hints at her then interesting condi-

tion. This shows he disliked his brother Miles. This mentions a servant with marked personal characteristics, which I am sure my friend Mr Brimeswiggles will excuse my saying, would mark him out among a thousand.'

'No offence, sir,' cried Brimeswiggles, cheerfully. 'One likes to have one's own individuality. Now these good-looking boys of the present day are so like one another, that they might be turned off by contract in hundreds from the same lathe or the same block.'

'Whisper, Georgina,' said Snewing, leaning towards her.

'Speak low, dear,' replied Mrs Pipechick.

'This begins to look fishy. That fellow Noyes *hasn't forged after all*.'

'Did you really think he had?' murmured she in his ear.

'Swear I did at one time. Our game is up,' he muttered.



‘You always told me you had enough for both, dear,’ suggested Mrs Pipechick tenderly.

‘Ugh!’ said Snewing, between his teeth.

‘Now, Mr Brimeswiggles,’ persuaded Podster, ‘will you have the goodness, as one of our national poets observes, to take up the tuneful tale?’

Brimeswiggles cleared his throat and proceeded—

‘I entered the service of the late Turner Sudgrove as valet about two years before his death. Brimeswiggles is a good name, and I’m proud of it, but, like my knobs, is unusual. Thus it wasn’t the name for domestic service. If a lady rings for coals, she couldn’t say before visitors “bring up coal, Brimeswiggles,” as liable to give them starts. So I became Josiah Wilson, “bring the coals, Wilson,” being in all respects an improvement. Mrs Kedge was there with me. She waited on Mrs Baker, I on Mr Turner. I had a great respect

for Mrs Kedge, my fellow-servant. Perhaps, if she had chosen, it might have got beyond respect; but she didn't, and an ornamental stationer took the wind out of my sails. His name was Kedge. I applaud his taste.'

'Bless the man,' struck in Mrs Kedge, 'never mind about that now.'

'One day lately,' continued Brimeswiddle, 'walking casually in Kilburn, I saw yonder little maiden-lady hovering and spying about some premises devoted to gravestones. Knowing she was up to mischief, by the yellowish spiteful look of her nose, I watched her. After a bit, who should come to the door she was watching, but my old friend Martha of twenty years back. Thus, I was able to lay my finger on Martha Bingle at once for my friend Podster.'

'This, then, comes of your nasty prying tricks, Aurelia,' said Mrs Pipechick; 'it is really most degrading in you to condescend to such meannesses.'

‘But I went by your express desire, Georgina; oh dear, oh dear!’ gasped Aurelia. ‘Everything goes wrong to-day. We shall have the pinky girl, with the hair, into the witness-box next. I’m prepared for anything.’

‘One day,’ resumed Brimeswiggles, ‘it might be six months before Mr Turner died, Kedge and me were called into the drawing-room. Mr Turner, says he, “This is my will, and you two must witness my signature.” Of course, he never told us the contents, or more about it. “Don’t say nothing, either of you,” says he, “to Mrs Baker about my having asked you to do this. It will only agitate her.” I was not in Mr Turner’s service when he died. My uncle, about two months after that, gave me an opening in my present business. I’ve got on ever since. Mr Turner was a kind master, and would not stand in my way. He let me leave at once. If ever there was a angel in petticoats, it was Mrs Baker; though, I suppose, moral coves

would be shocked at my saying so. However, I never had any call to judge folks, except as I found them. I shall now conclude, and can be drawn out by questions, as to anything I've slipt.'

'Now, Mrs Kedge,' said Noyes, 'we shall be glad to hear your account.'

Kedge balanced herself once or twice from one foot to the other, and spoke to this purpose—

'It's all correct as Wilson as told you, about how we signed ; and how Mr Turner would not have Mrs Baker worried about it. I was her lady's maid. Poor thing, she was moping a good deal about the will time, in consequence of her condition. And Mr Turner he was ill too, though she never expected him to go off so sudden as he did at last, as them consumptives will do. To my sinful shame, I had left her a month before Turner died. I had kept company with Kedge, and he forced me to leave the place to get married ; a stationer he was, as Wilson has told you. It was

selfish in me to go at a time when the poor dear could spare me so little. But Kedge said he had waited long enough, and I feared to lose him. I never saw a couple so loving as Turner and Melusina used to be. The fidgets she was in if he was a minute behind time from the city. The pains he took to study her in every little way. They used to be like children together. She was as beautiful as a star; such a quiet thoughtful look she had. I shall never to my dying day see she acted wrong. Her mother threw her in Turner's way, when she was a slip of a girl of seventeen. He was known to be very rich, and the mother thought to make a good harvest for herself through her daughter. That mother was a bad one, and the sister too, if you like. As hard and bad, both of 'em, as women could be. Melusina told me, that, for a year or more, she did not care about Turner; but that, after then, she came to love him, as much as any woman ever could love her husband. As

for him, he was wrapt up in her from the very first, and I believe up to the day of his death only grew fonder and fonder of her. Melusina quarrelled with her mother and sister some months before his death, as the letter says right enough. She would never ask him for a penny for them ; poor child, she never dreamt of asking for herself ; and the old lady, her mother, came and stormed one day in the hall, and called her names, and told her she would die a beggar, and cast her off all together. Well, I've told you, I was not with her at his death ; but it might be about three months after it, a girl came to Kedge's shop to say that a young woman was very ill in their house, and had asked for me. There I found Melusina in a poor kind of garret, with two pounds in her purse, just confined ; I stayed and nursed her through it, though Kedge grumbled uncommon ; and when her two pounds was gone, we kept her on upon some money I had in the "Savings," unbeknowns to Kedge. For

not knowing, when we married, what he might take to, drink or what not, I thought it would do no harm like to keep a nest-egg for a rainy day, independent of him. Well, she got well slowly, and then I moved her to our place; pretending she was a lodger, and making believe she paid rent; and, by degrees, she got to be able to almost keep herself with needle-work. She found a respectable man to marry her, in about two years' time; and Kedge dying an insolvency soon after her marriage, she took me in in turn; and, till her death, we remained together. She had told me, that how she came to the garret was this. Turner dying sudden at last, his brother came there a few hours afterwards; and being an uncommonly pious man, would not allow her to sit by his dead brother, which she was doing. She says the brother looked about quite honest everywhere for a will, and even asked her if she could produce any writing of his brother's; but when she could not, and he had made sure

there was none, he gave her a five-pound note, and turned her out at an hour's notice; and when she told him her condition, he only got the more angry, being a very pious gentleman, and said such women ought to be made examples of. He told her, besides, that every stick of furniture in the house was his by the law of the country; and that if she didn't go quietly, he would have the police in. She only packed a few clothes, and went into the room to kiss Turner; and, as she came out, he saw her hiding something in her dress; so, being a very particular gentleman, he had her searched, but it only turned out a bit of hair the poor child had just cut off in there to keep. So he merely told her, that her affections were sinful, and that she would probably come to a bad end, and he turned her out without any more ado; being a great man at missionary meetings, and such, and a very pious gentleman altogether. I told Melusina, as to how I had witnessed a will of



Turner's; that is, I told her about a year after he died; but she said he must have tore it up, as his brother had made every search; and she said she would not face the brother again for twenty wills; and that now Turner was dead, money was no use to her, as she could never care for any one again, or ever feel really happy. I don't know that there is any more to say, except that my signature's correct, and that I'm glad to shake hands with Josiah Wilson again,' which she proceeded to do.

'Thank you, Mrs Kedge,' resumed Noyes, after a brief general silence. 'Now, Mr Snewing, will you or Mrs Pipechick ask any questions you may feel inclined?'

Snewing had become more and more gloomy-faced during every line of Mrs Kedge's story; making an effort now, he observed in his usual overbearing tone,—

'I must say, Mr Noyes, that, did I even allow these two statements to pass, which I don't, still all this advances us no one step further. Melusina is dead, ac-

cording to your own witness; till Melusina's child is produced, Mrs Pipechick's title is incontrovertible.'

'Exactly, Mr Snewing,' was all Noyes deigned to reply.

'Then I demand that this child be produced,' said Snewing vehemently.

'Podster,' said Noyes, without moving a muscle of his face, 'you had better bring in numbers five, six, and seven simultaneously.'

Enter Samson, Helen, and Brian, to the inconceivable astonishment of the assemblage.

Aurelia quite gave way, and throwing up her arms, shrieked, 'The pinky girl! I knew she would be in it somehow!'

'How dare you enter my house?' demanded Mrs Pipechick of her brother.

'Your presence, at least, Mr Brian Sudgrove, was not required,' reiterated Gow.

'Have the goodness to enlighten our ignorance, Mr Noyes,' sneered Snewing to the attorney.

‘That’s easily done,’ proceeded Noyes, leaning his hand upon the table, and looking Snewing triumphantly in the face. ‘The threads of these narratives all converge in one central point of interest—the child of Melusina Baker. Therefore allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to present to you Helen, the daughter of Melusina Baker, under her recently acquired appellation of Mrs Brian Sudgrove.’





## CHAPTER XV.

### STRANGE NEMESIS OVERTAKES AURELIA.

**T**HE great meeting at the Sudgrove mansion was breaking up, and the various persons, who had assisted thereat, were descending the doorsteps with varied expressions of countenance. All were more or less excited, but some looked pleased in their excitement, and some looked quite the reverse.

As Hood Comper was about to be wheeled away in his bath-chair, Stephen Gow came up and laid his hand on the arm of the invalid.

‘I am coming home with you, Hood,’

he said, gravely, 'to ask my wife's pardon, and beg her to come back to Russell Square.'

'I am thankful, Gow,' returned the other, 'that you have decided on taking this step.'

'I've been a jealous, contemptible fool,' resumed Stephen, penitently. 'I've allowed myself to be worked upon by a knave and a she-devil. No excuse—I say, no excuse.'

'Clara will not bear resentment,' responded his brother-in-law. 'I shall miss a kind nurse. She has become a kind of necessity to me already.'

'That very engaging and beautiful person, Mrs Brian,' pursued Stephen, 'came up, and told me in the frankest way, that my wife was only coming to see her that day from the Museum with Brian, according to an old promise. If Clara had but chosen to stop my mad ravings that day by one word of this!'

'Clara is sensitive,' explained Hood; 'the idea of being distrusted makes her

shrink at once into a kind of proud reserve.'

'I know—I know,' murmured Gow. 'Dear little Clara! you will intercede for an elderly idiot, won't you, Hood?'

'My dear Gow,' said the other, 'I am certain Clara will not be obdurate enough for you to require my good offices.'

And so they continued their way together.

Dovey Snewing and Mrs Pipechick were left alone in the dining-room at this period.

'You will not desert me, Dovey dear,' she entreated, 'though they do rob me of my poor father's bounty? I was willing to have shared my prosperity with you.'

'You have deceived me, Georgina,' said Snewing, with an impatient gesture. 'Come, I can't stay here to be pawed about all day. Be less effusive, or you'll make me swear. You have bitterly deceived me.'

'Why, Dovey dear,' reminded Mrs

Pipechick, 'did not my own say, when he proposed, that my improved prospects had nothing to do with his increased affection ?'

'Don't pester about that now,' he replied, shaking her off. 'I never supposed even you believed it. It was the right kind of thing to say, you know; a kind of common form,' he sneered. 'What business have you to call yourself a widow, if you haven't a jointure? It's a fraud on society, I say. What was your late fool, Pipechick, about ?'

'O don't be so brutal, Dovey,' wept Mrs Pipechick. 'I was deceived as to Mr Pipechick's means when I married him. The wretched creature gave me a mere pittance of pin-money, and refused me leave to valse. He assigned everything for the benefit of his creditors, and then went into the tombs.'

'It's a pity he couldn't make you over as well,' exclaimed Snewing, with a coarse laugh.

‘You said, you had ample for both, Dovey; indeed you did,’ she reiterated.

‘I tell you what it is, Georgina,’ said he, browbeating and overbearing her, ‘a fellow is not so doocid fond of being brought to book about all the nonsense he may let fall to a party he expected to cut up well. Besides, I’ve been heavily hit with this Spanish Castles business. They have called up about two thousand of that waste paper upon me, only yesterday. Where’s it to come from, woman? Don’t stare helplessly at me. Bah! don’t try looking sentimental—it doesn’t suit you.’

‘Perhaps Brian might lend it me, suggested the wretched woman.

‘Likely, after the tricks you and that she-devil, Van, have served him. I know I wouldn’t, in his case,’ returned the amiable Snewing.

‘But you will marry me?’ she entreated.

‘I don’t know: we shall see. I won’t be baited and hurried,’ blurted out by




jerks her affectionate suitor. 'Let me keep myself out of gaol for the next few days. Leave the wedding-favours till I'm clear of the bailiff's hand.'

'O Dovey, if I could help you in any way,' she sighed.


'Don't maunder on like that,' he snarled. 'Help me, indeed! What would those gold gimcracks about you melt up for, I wonder? You've enough of them, in all conscience. You load yourself like a caravan camel. You can't need half of them.'

Poor Mrs Pipechick began despoiling her neck, breast, and arms, like a pelican in its piety, as the heralds say, for the benefit of her ungrateful wooer.

Aurelia Van bore the triumph of the 'pinky girl' with considerable want of fortitude. She had been exposed at the meeting, and insulted by all sides of the question. This she was tolerably used to; but that Helen, whom she hated with the fiercest concentration of baffled spitefulness, should



have turned out the heiress of all Turner Sudgrove's wealth, was too much for her limited store of philosophy. Descending the steps of Russell Square, she felt that too wild a commotion was raging in her brain, for her to return to the monotony of her home in Tavistock Street. A fearful fascination drew her steps northwards by the route she had tracked Brian. What could they be about at Memoria Lodge? What were the newly married couple doing? She felt the strangest objectless longing to watch and pry upon them once more. She hated them so bitterly, that she wished to see them making love to each other, that she might hate them even more. On she shambled towards Kilburn, mastered by an unaccountable impulse. Nearer and nearer she drew; before she was aware, she had stumbled on the haystack, and Brimeswiddle and Mrs Kedge laughing together before the little wicket-gate. She tried to start back and retire before they could catch sight of her. Too late; the eagle eye of Kedge



has recognized that unmistakeable skimpy black drapery in retreat. A few bounds and Kedge was at her side, flushed with her morning's triumph. Brimeswiggie judged it better not to intervene, but he grinned on them from afar. Aurelia hastily surveyed her position, and her heart died within her. Kedge had hemmed her in between the haystack and a green-coated duck pond, which bordered the road. An explanation with Kedge was unavoidable; so Aurelia tried to quell Kedge at first by her genteel and unconcerned air.

‘And what may you have come here after, mem, this fine evening?’ demanded Kedge.

When she came to think it over, Aurelia could not, for the life of her, think why she had come.

‘Woman,’ she returned in a stately tone, ‘I, I was taking a walk. I am not aware that walking is against any act of parliament.’

‘What call had you to leap back like a

wild-cat when you see me?’ threatened Kedge.

‘Allow me to pass. I desire to bandy no words with you—’

‘Have you got your father a new gravestone? Ugh, you sweet liar,’ exclaimed Kedge with her arms akimbo.

‘I shall appeal to the civil authorities,’ fluttered out Aurelia, trying vainly to pass her.

‘Have you been making any more sweet girls cry their eyes out with your spying and slanders, you dirty old salamander?’

This vague and fearful term, suggested probably by some homogeneity of sound to ‘slander,’ nerved even the flurried Aurelia to reply angrily.

‘You are a termagant; and let me pass, or I will have you locked up. Helen Rainbird is a false minx; I insist on proceeding with my—walk.’

This aspersion on her favourite crowned Kedge’s anger. ‘You call Miss

Helen that again,' she said, trembling with passion, 'you old refuse cat, that ain't worthy for her to wipe her shoes on; you utter them syllables once more, and—'

'You'll do what?' shrieked Aurelia, with a desperate rush at her to pass, which was so sudden that Aurelia got all but by; then thinking herself clear, she rashly renewed the taunt, crying, 'a false minx, and I say it again, you blustering fish-wife.'

If Aurelia's skirts had been two inches shorter, she had escaped scathless the ordeal of the anger of Kedge. But Kedge had managed to clutch the extreme hem of her flying apparel. On to this she held, and from this she came on, hand over hand, until she acquired a firmer hold by the more solid portions of her enemy's attire.

Aurelia shuddered like a reed in her muscular grasp.

'I'll do this,' cried Kedge; 'since you called my darling that again, I'll put you into yonder duck-pond.'

Catching up the wretched old Van like a child, Kedge with the strength of a giant plunged her bellowing once—twice—literally over-head in the noisome pool ; Aurelia then choked to such an extent, and presented such a pitiable sight, that Kedge's anger was appeased, and she released her hold. Aurelia had shrunk during her immersion to the size of a small boy ; her oozing drapery clung closely to her thin limbs ; she seemed a dripping mass of black slime, coated with duckweed from head to foot. Kedge then strode laughing back to Brimeswiggles, who, we regret to say, exploded in peals of merriment ; as Aurelia, regaining her feet, staggered southwards like an animated and immersed field-scarecrow, tracking the white dusty road with a shower of black drops in her wake as she went.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### A GRUDGE FROM HIS SCHOOL-DAYS.

‘**T**HIS is a humiliating pass,’ mused Dovey Snewing, as he packed a portmanteau in King Street, ‘for a man of my versatile genius to have come to. Of all the resources which lately lay so ready to my hand, but one remains. A coarse and vulgar expedient; which may be compendiously stated in the expressive Anglo-Saxon monosyllable “bolt.” Hail, Columbia, shall be my song. I fancy the land of freedom will suit my peculiar graces; meantime, I have a fairish sum to begin the New World with.’

Here he pulled out a large bundle of bank-notes, which he told carefully over.

‘Fourteen hundred and odd,’ he continued, ‘the hard-won spoils of the Spanish Castles bubble. That brute of a secretary stood out like a tiger for his slice of the swag, otherwise I should have done better Secretary crosses to Norway to-night, while I spread steam and canvas wings to-morrow for the remote stars and stripes. Will Pipechick be very inconsolable? What a nuisance she stood fair to have become, should I ever have settled down into a quarter-sessional magnate at Orpwood? I suppose Noyes must, in all certainty, eventually despoil my effusive widow of her inheritance. A good coup this of master Brian making up to that stone-chipping girl. Pretty, too, but certainly painted. I would have stayed and fought it out for her to reward my Pipechick’s devotion; for I need not have committed myself matrimonially, till it was certain which way the thing would go; but the treachery of



that scoundrel, Worboys, has blown my fairy "castles" into fragments, and rendered the prosecution of the eminent Dovey Snewing by baffled and howling shareholders hourly imminent. Therefore, Albion, farewell! I leave in a beautiful spirit of resignation. I forgive all my enemies except one, whom I mean to settle scores with at the last minute on my way to catch the express at Euston. Let me see, will this riding-whip be heavy enough? I think it will, judiciously used. I must be nearly ready now to weigh anchor.'

Snewing rang the bell.

'Tell the housekeeper,' he said, when the servant came, 'that I am leaving town for a few days only. Forward all letters to Jingo Lodge, Rubbleton, Hertfordshire. Be very particular about the address, or they may not reach me, these country posts are so uncertain. I expect several gentlemen will call for me in the next few days. Should one come in a blue overcoat, tell him how particularly sorry I am to have

missed him. You can remember all this, eh? That's well; then, meet me with this portmanteau at 4.45 at Euston Square, and call me a hansom now.'

Outside on the pavement opposite, gazing up, from one moment to another, towards Mr Snewing's window, is evidently a very leisurely and unoccupied member of society. He chews a straw, which he removes from time to time to expectorate. He is habited somewhat like a gamekeeper on a Sunday. He seems barely to notice the fact, that a hansom is summoned to Snewing's door; but, on his casually whistling, another cab comes from round the corner, and draws up within twenty yards of the same chewer. Snewing comes out, and ascends his hansom; the man with the straw enters his vehicle soon after; both cabs roll away together. Snewing has many commissions to-day. At the Bank he converts a considerable number of bank-notes into gold. A man with a straw, evidently a raw countryman, happens to

be asking an idiotic question of a clerk at an adjoining counter at the same time; but now apparently the end of Snewing's commission must be at hand; for it is nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, when he alights at the house of Hood Comper. Soon afterwards, an individual lounges by, with a strange resemblance to the same countryman at the Bank counter.

'Can I see Mr Hood Comper alone?' he demands of the servant.

The servant would see. What name?

'The name of Smith,' replied Snewing, leisurely dusting his pantaloons with his riding-whip.

Snewing goes in. The countryman rings the area bell—a humble countryman! 'Who's he asked for, him as is just gone in? I'm a detective officer. He's going off with some money.'

'Mr Hood Comper,' rejoined the frightened buttons.

The countryman beckons his driver.

‘Get us two more in uniform; I shall take him here.’

The cab trots off. The countryman then bids the buttons to conduct him noiselessly to the door of Mr Hood Comper’s apartment. Voices are high within. The countryman tries the door-handle noiselessly. The door has evidently been locked on the inside since the ingress of the visitor.

‘Is Mr Comper a muscular chap, likely to hold his own for a bit?’ inquires the countryman in the ear of the mealy-faced page.

‘Lord bless you, he’s a palsy cripple,’ rejoined the boy in a whisper.

‘Then you run down, and fetch me up the kitchen poker,’ commanded the countryman, ‘and be sharp.’

Meantime the following dialogue took place inside.

‘Now, Hood Comper, the day of my revenge is come; the door is locked, you are helpless, and in my power; and I in-

tend to square an account of tolerably long standing,' said Snewing, standing over the invalid with an expression of vindictive hatred.

'It is fate,' moaned Hood, 'that you should have been able to get in. I suppose you mean to murder me. My life is not worth keeping. I hope you'll be quick about it.'

'It seems,' hissed Snewing, 'I owe the discovery of these will-witnesses to your cursed and officious interference. This is a good stout whip, and here is as firm an arm to use it. A crippled cur must be licked about the head to teach him better manners.'

And Snewing struck the invalid across the face with his riding-whip, raising a white mark. Then he paused to watch the effect. But beyond shuddering, the sick man gave no cry.

'Oho,' cried Snewing, 'we are going in for fortitude, and all that platform. Well, my friend, you'll want it all, presently.

That was a mere sweet little foretaste of pleasures to come. This is number two, a little stiffer, eh? And so we propose to improve the quality and severity by degrees.'

'You are a cruel and merciless coward,' panted Hood Comper.

'Since you were officious enough,' sneered Snewing, between his teeth, 'to announce in public the history of my school-boy transgression, I took an oath I would pay you out. I don't wish to kill you, for you are wretched enough to please even me in your present state, my cripple; but I intend, as I leave England to-morrow, to give myself the extreme felicity of paying you out the school-boy thrashing you gave me, and paying it too with interest.'

'I hear steps on the stairs,' cried Hood, 'I believe you will be baffled yet. Thank Heaven. Thank Heaven.'

'Then, my helpless friend,' cried Snewing, springing upon him, and seizing

him by the throat, 'since your servants have the want of tact to interfere, you must get your punishment sharp and hot, for my time is evidently short.'

And Snewing applied his riding-whip with brutal violence and rapidity.

'Help,' cried the sick man, 'help.'

The sounds outside redoubled. They were evidently bursting in the door with some heavy instrument.


Snewing paused in his task, and rushed to the window. It opened on to the leads of the roof. Further on there seemed to be a tree, by which any tolerable climber could descend and reach the ground.

'What do you want?' shouted Snewing through the door.

'It's the police, master,' screamed the terrified buttons; 'he's going off with some money. Hold him fast.'

Snewing crawled through the opened window, and disappeared on the roof-leads in a moment.

The door gave way soon after. The



countryman and two officers in uniform rushed in. Hood was stretched senseless on the floor with his face fearfully bruised and cut.

‘He has done us,’ cried the countryman; ‘try the window, one of you.’

The officers scrambled through in pursuit of Snewing; presently they descried him just swinging himself from the sill of a roof fifty yards distant by the branch of a lime-tree. Their appearance, coming rapidly towards him, disconcerted Snewing. He seemed all at once to lose his head and self-possession; instead of grasping down the firm main branch, which he had hold of, and by which he would have reached the trunk of the tree; and whence he could have easily swerved down to the ground; he made a wild clutch at an adjoining branch, which was leafless and rotten, and which instantly snapped off short. For a moment he held on to the firm branch by his one other hand; but soon becoming exhausted, he let go and dropped heavily to the ground,



a fall of about thirty-five feet. There he lay motionless. The officers re-entered the house, and descended inside, and came and raised him up. On conveying him to the nearest hospital, his thigh-bone was found to be broken, and the house surgeon predicted, that he would probably, if he got over it, be a cripple for life. The wounds of Hood Comper were then carefully dressed and attended to. They were severe, but if Hood had been a healthy man, not necessarily dangerous; till, however, they could see what effect the murderous attack of Snewing should have upon the enfeebled system of the paralytic, they declined to give any positive opinion as to Hood Comper's recovery, so far as the newly-inflicted injuries went.





## CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TERRACE AT ORPWOOD.

**S**IX years have elapsed since our last chapter. A rich autumnal sunset has just died into orange behind the lawn cedars. Brian and Helen are watching its changes. A miniature Brian and a diminutive Helen are playing about at their parents' feet, in the close sward, engaged in the preparation of daisy chains.

‘Well, old wife,’ began Brian, ‘you are my old wife now—fancy six years of married life have already run with us.’

‘How happy we have been, husband,’

said Helen; 'how delicious this feeling of growing old together is.'

'Our first year was rather troubled by the family lawsuit,' continued Brian, 'but Podster and Noyes got us through that, and here we are, squire and dame. Quite old and experienced in our round of country tasks. I know all about highway and poor-rates; and I'm sure the sight of you is better than flannel for rheumatic old cottage crones.'

'I won't be flattered, sir,' cried Helen, 'a husband of six years must give up paying his wife compliments.'

'By the way, dear,' he went on, 'I've a marriage for you. Podster completed the estate map yesterday. He really is invaluable. What does he do but announce, that now the estate is mapped, he has leisure at last for matrimony. It's a Miss Clara Stalker he met during his first year here at Penshingle.'

'I'm so glad, dear,' rejoiced Helen, 'we owe him so much. Could we not do some-

thing permanent for him, through his wife, which he need never know ?’

‘A good plan, old lady,’ he assented. ‘I will call you old lady. You needn’t look at me.’

‘For shame, Brian, those labourers are looking,’ she remonstrated.

‘Does papa kiss mamma when she has been very good ?’ inquires Brian junior of his sister.

‘Of course,’ replied little Helen sedately, ‘what else should he kiss her for?’

‘An amusing letter from Georgina,’ said Brian; ‘if I am a day behind with her quarter’s allowance, she is down on me at once in no measured terms.’

‘But the gift is purely voluntary, dear, on your part,’ returned Helen; ‘and, indeed, after all her plotting against you, wonderfully generous.’

‘She had joined horses in a household sense,’ pursued Brian, ‘with old Aurelia Van. They both appreciate the economy of the proceeding; but I hear they wrangle

so incessantly in-doors and out, that the rent of the houses on each side of them are likely to become depreciated.'

Helen laughed. 'Poor thing, does that dreadful Mr Snewing beg of her yet?'

'After his two years' imprisonment,' answered Brian, 'Snewing hung about the watering-places and gambling-tables of Germany. He is very lame, and a partial cripple. Hood Comper is, strange to say, not a whit worse than he has been these ten years. He keeps some of Snewing's marks about his face still.'

'Don't rake up that dreadful story,' she entreated. 'But how does Snewing manage to live now?'

'Stay, I did hear,' reflected Brian; 'I have it now. The Knoblauchs have allowed him to become the marker in a billiard-room of their public-house in Lambeth.'

'And the Bakers quite live with Mr Brimeswiggles now?'

'Oh yes,' answered Brian; 'you see, he

and Martha Kedge contracted matrimony at too late an age for any such daisy-chaining encumbrances as these; so, I little doubt, that Vincent Baker and Selina will have what Brimeswiggles and Martha leave. When your old nurse comes for her annual monthly visit, I suppose we must give her the option of the Bakers coming as well.'

'And old Mr Noyes—is not he rather lonely?' mused Helen.

'Oh, he drinks a good deal of port wine, and devotes himself to the intricacies of conveyancing, and Selina comes and sees him now and then,' replied Brian.

'The Gows have proposed themselves for next week, dear,' resumed Helen. 'I told you, did I not?'

'It will do very well,' returned Brian. 'Old Stephen will enjoy our agricultural dinner. I really think Clara is very fairly happy with him now.'

'His retirement from business,' reasoned Helen, 'improved matters very much. He travels about more with her now,

gives her change and variety of scenes and acquaintance. That city set in Russell Square would really have damped the spirits of any one.'

'You heard from Mrs Rainbird, too?' asked he.

'Oh, that,' laughed Helen, 'is about a notable scheme, worthy of the stock of Pilloclalf, by which I am to manage that Loo is to fascinate some of our young squirelings down here. Mrs Rainbird seems to think it entirely my fault, that a certain conquest of Loo's, real or imaginary, at our last county ball, drops through somehow.'

'And your dear old stepfather won't retire from his chipping yet? It is really so obstinate of him, when we should not feel the making him comfortable,' said Brian.

'Oh, papa is fearfully independent,' returned Helen, with a grave smile.

'I think, love, you had better get the

children in ; the dews are beginning,' suggested Brian.

'I am going to stitch frocks in my sitting-room when the lamp comes, and you can bring there, and get on with, your plans for cottages,' said Helen, rising and calling the children.

'Who loves you, Helen?' said he.

'How should I guess?' she laughed.

THE END.









